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# TIME AND THE CONWAYS

A Play in Three Acts

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# TIME AND THE CONWAYS

*by*

J. B. PRIESTLEY

*With an Introduction by*

IRENE HENTSCHEL



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ACT III is continuous with ACT I

The scene throughout is a sitting-room in Mrs. Conway's house, a detached villa in a prosperous suburb of a manufacturing town, Newlingham. ACTS I and III take place on an autumn night in 1919. ACT II on an autumn night at the present time (1937).

First produced in London on 26th August, 1937, at the Duchess Theatre, with the following cast:

HAZEL  
CAROL  
ALAN  
MADGE  
KAY  
MRS. CONWAY  
JOAN HELFORD  
GERALD THORNTON  
ERNEST BEEVERS  
ROBIN

Rosemary Scott  
Eileen Erskine  
Raymond Huntley  
Molly Rankin  
Jean Forbes-Robertson  
Barbara Everest  
Helen Horsey  
Wilfred Babbage  
Mervyn Johns  
Alexander Archdale

The Play produced by  
IRENE HENTSCHEL



## INTRODUCTION

By IRENE HENTSCHEL

ONE of the happiest and most exciting productions with which I have been associated was *Time and the Conways* and I envy all those who are about to have the thrill of approaching this play for the first time. For me it was an unforgettable experience, and one that was shared by all who took part in the first performance at the Duchess Theatre in 1937; it was, too, an experience that I am sure has been enjoyed by the many who have since played in it; they are many, for it has been played with great success in practically every country. I certainly know that it is true of those who have appeared in British Repertory and Amateur Companies; it has been proved to me so often by the replies to my question, "What is your favourite part?" Nine times out of ten the answer, without hesitation, is a character from *Time and the Conways*.

I had the additional pleasure of being asked by the author, before the play was written, if I would produce it (quite the most gratifying compliment that has ever been paid to me in the theatre); and when the first draft was handed to me a month later I had the extraordinary sensation of reading an entirely new play and seeing it in my mind's eye as vividly as if it were already a finished production on the stage. This odd flash (almost a feeling of having been there before) helped to overcome my diffidence at the thought of dealing with such an unfamiliar and complex subject as John Dunne's Time Theory. Fortunately J. B. Priestley's play is as much about the "Conways" as "Time", or perhaps Priestley has just skilfully simplified the Fourth Dimensional theories so as not to alarm those of us who do not possess mathematical minds. At any rate, the unusual method of jumping twenty years ahead to the second Act and back again to the third presented, surprisingly, few difficulties either to the company or to me. On the contrary we found that the playing of Act II, with its bitter, heart-breaking feeling of frustration, enriched the players when they came to Act III and gave them an emotional quality and an understanding that was invaluable.

We proved this by rehearsing the play in the straightforward time sequence (it had seemed easier to memorise the lines that way), but oddly enough, even at the earlier rehearsals, we always found that something was lacking in the spirit and emotion of Act III, both from the actor's view-point and mine in the empty stalls. The proposal scene for instance, between Robin and Joan, gains a poignancy

which it can never have unless it is preceded by a glimpse of their married life in Act II.

JOAN: Robin, it's terribly *serious*, you know.

ROBIN: Oh—yes—don't think I don't feel that, too. But that's no reason why we shouldn't enjoy ourselves.

JOAN (*crying out*): No, no, no, let's be happy for ever and ever.

Without the audience's knowledge of what is in store for them this might seem rather a flat little scene, but coming where it does, every syllable, pause, and comma has a dramatic significance. It is the same with each clash of temperament between the other members of the family. The hostility born of jealousy between Madge and her mother, Hazel's fear of her husband and his contempt for her and old Mrs. Conway's disappointment in her children. All feeling of suspense and drama would be lost if we knew exactly how this had come about.

What is the secret that gives *Time and the Conways* its magnetic quality? All those who have played in it develop a love for it that is almost maternal. Those of us who were associated with the original production became positively fanatical in the wish that the audience would share our feelings. "Maternal" is the only word I can think of which will, in any way, describe our state of mind. This was a mixture of possessiveness and pride, together with a frightful anxiety lest Priestley's child (and by this time we were all god-parents too!) should not be fully appreciated by the audience.

Up to a point these are quite normal reactions for a Producer to have for any new play that is in process of being brought to life, but on this occasion the symptoms were far more acute than usual and were shared by every member of the company. Surprisingly, because as a rule actors are inclined to wear "blinkers" so far as the play as a whole is concerned and only worry unceasingly (and possibly rightly) about their own individual share in it. But during these rehearsals it was different; we *must* make the audience love this family of Conways and we must make them share the sense of exhilaration which the play brings in freeing us from the fear that Time is a tyrant and is trying to destroy us.

I think that this is roughly what we were feeling during those weeks before the opening night. But we need not have worried; our wishes were certainly realised beyond expectation on the first night. The critics and audience were exceptionally enthusiastic and found in the play all that Priestley had put there of tenderness and poignancy, comedy and tragedy, with the Time Theory (that was so inclined to cause alarm) holding the play together and giving it a special dramatic quality of its own.

There are many, I am sure, who share my memory of the beautiful Act II curtain. It has for me to-day, as it had the very first time I read it, an impact in its very quietness that is illuminating and exciting.

ALAN: . . . You know, I believe half our trouble now is because we think Time's ticking away our lives. That's why we snatch and grab and hurt each other.

KAY: As if we were all in a panic on a sinking ship.

ALAN: Yes, like that.

KAY: But you don't do those things—bless you!

ALAN: I think it's easier not to—if you take the long view.

KAY: As if we're—immortal beings.

ALAN: Yes, and in for a tremendous adventure.

*(He goes out. KAY, comforted but still brooding goes to the window and stands looking out, with head raised.)*

A decade seems to have passed since these lines were written, and another war has shattered us, but the scene to-day seems to have an even greater significance. The expression on Jean Forbes-Robertson's face, the sudden flash of hope in her eyes as she listened to Raymond Huntley (as Alan) explaining so very gently his philosophy of living, is something I shall never forget.

The artists in this scene have no opportunity for "big" acting; no sudden movements, no telling gestures are required, just a complete sincerity and a belief in what they are doing. There must be a tremendous feeling of companionship and, on Kay's side, the ability to relax completely and allow the sensation of solace and exhilaration roused by Alan's quiet belief to flow gently through her. Not an easy task for either of the artists, and not acting in the conventional meaning of the term, but as Jean Forbes-Robertson in London, and Jessica Tandy in New York and the many others who have played Kay have discovered, how stimulating and rewarding!

There are many different methods of staging a play. I am inclined to regret that the title "Producer" has been replaced to-day by the more formal and austere sounding "Director". (In America it is usual for the manager who is financially responsible for presenting the play to be known as the "Producer". In order to avoid confusion this practice has been followed here and the film term "Director" is now more or less generally used to describe the individual who is engaged to stage a play.)

However, the word may be misleading. To me, it conjures up the picture of an aloof individual driving a team; this is necessary, no doubt, for a big spectacular drama with crowd scenes and mass movements, but it is dangerous, in my opinion, for a play that deals

primarily with human relationships. Each individual has his or her own way of expressing emotion and it is not easy for a sensitive actor to let his feelings flow naturally unless he is relaxed and uninhibited. To worry him with an upward or downward inflection at an early rehearsal or to insist that he takes three steps and turn to the left on a given line, while he is still struggling to feel and to understand the words, can, I believe, do irreparable damage to the ultimate and finished performance.

Where one actor needs a quick walk to help him to release his feelings another can achieve it by standing quite still. One actress may need the back of a chair to clutch to help her to control her tears, while another can stand rigid with clasped hands. I believe very strongly that it does not matter how an effect is achieved (and there are always a dozen different methods) so long as it is based on the personality of the player. Jean Forbes-Robertson, for instance, hated moving on the stage. She had to be cajoled and coaxed out of a chair; Jessica Tandy on the contrary had a much more quick-silver temperament. But in their different ways each played Kay superbly. It would have been no help to the play or to the individual performances if I had insisted that they conformed to a set pattern. That is why I have found that to "produce", to "blend", or best of all to "co-operate", is the wisest method when dealing with a play of emotions. It is a slower process, but the result is more permanent.

In *Time and the Conways* co-operation was definitely our key-word. Rarely have I worked in the theatre so harmoniously and easily. Thanks to the skill of the writing every line expressed exactly what the author wished the character to think and feel. I do not remember anyone asking to have a word changed and that is a surprising memory, because few rehearsals go through to the day of production without a certain amount of re-writing and blue pencilling.

The first and third acts are the most tricky from the technical angle. The charades and all the business of dressing-up are complicated to rehearse. Each garment must look as if it is snatched up spontaneously and thrown down carelessly; yet, if it does not land in exactly the right spot for the next speaker to find, the timing of the lines will go wrong and the result will be an untidy muddle. I often long to have the opportunity of re-producing the difficult Charade scene. To-day I would try and simplify it. I look back on the first production of this scene with some shame and feel that, perhaps, we all enjoyed ourselves too much, so losing some of the lines in the fun we had! Perhaps Priestley will give me the chance of putting this right one day.

The party sounds of merriment were another problem. "Noises off" are more of a nightmare for the Stage Manager than the Producer.

The unseen people responsible for them are inclined to get too hilarious as time goes on and it is difficult for them, if they are laughing merrily, to hear the lines spoken on the stage. The danger is that they will shout through them and drown them. We found that almost a second play—with dialogue, laughs, clinking of glasses, pouring out of drinks and odd snatches of piano playing and singing—must seem to go on practically all the time; but on no account must it overlap the lines being spoken on the stage. As those responsible for the “noises off” had to be placed fairly far away, they could not hear what was happening on the stage and we found the only way to control their exuberance was to have someone acting as a kind of conductor and standing where she could hear both the dialogue on the stage and the “noises off” and then point to the various “sounds” as their cues came, i.e., (1) three bars of piano playing, (2) laughs, (3) clatter of glasses, etc., etc. It was a jig-saw puzzle and it needed hours of time to dove-tail it perfectly. But I think the result was worth it. No member of the audience so far as I can remember found it distracting or even noticed it at all; and that is the highest compliment that can be paid to unseen “noises off”.

The realistic domestic play is one of the most difficult to produce. It looks so simple, there are no highly coloured moments, no flamboyant speeches. It is easier to get a quick theatrical effect with a shouting mob against a backcloth showing a fiery sunset than to suggest the dramatic conflict that exists in the picture of an exhausted, frustrated woman correcting school essays, filling her fountain pen and letting the audience know that her heart is breaking.

It is better I think with *Time and the Conways* to have a young cast, because so much depends on getting a true feeling of youth and optimism in the first and third acts. I have seen the Conways played by very young students and although the average age was only eighteen years they gave an enchanting performance and created an excellent illusion of maturity in the second act. I have been told, too, that a particularly beautiful production with a youthful company, was given in Vienna in 1946 at the Josefstadt Theatre. I regret very much that I did not see this performance.

Both Jean Forbes-Robertson and Jessica Tandy, who played Kay in London and New York, relied on the simplest changes of make-up to suggest the passing years. The hair was brushed back neatly and the colour taken out of the cheeks and lips; a lower voice was used and slightly slower movements. Hazel, played in London by Rosemary Scott and in New York by Hazel Terry, added rather more colour to the cheeks and lips to give the effect of being fashionably made up; by wearing too many furs and jewellery and by using a drawling accent they both suggested very poignantly the wealthy, disillusioned

and frightened woman who had replaced the gay, golden girl of the first act. Madge, we found, needed a slightly more ageing make-up, and both Molly Rankin (London) and Joan Henley (New York) mixed some strands of grey hair with their own. Wherever possible it is always wiser to avoid wearing wigs. For an amateur production when only one or two performances are given, I would always suggest powdering the hair. It is much softer and does not give the top-heavy effect of a wig. Lining the face to suggest wrinkles is another dangerous practice and I always advise against it. The right mental process which automatically slows down the movements and produces a flatter note in the voice together with very little make-up is a much safer and more subtle method.

Although *Time and the Conways* has a sad and sometimes a harsh quality there is never any feeling of defeatism in the play. On the contrary, if the players have given sincere and simple performances, when the curtain falls, the audience is comforted by the conviction that nothing in life is really lost; the good as well as the bad moments are still there, both the sunny and the stormy days, and we are grateful to Priestley for reminding us of this in Alan's quotation from Blake:

“Man was made for joy and woe  
And when this we rightly know  
Safely through the world we go.”

## ACT I

*There is a party at the Conways, this autumn evening of 1919, but we cannot see it, only hear it. All we can see at first is the light from the hall coming through the curtained archway on the right of the room, and a little red firelight on the other side. But we can hear young voices chattering and laughing and singing, the sharp little explosion of a cracker or two, and a piano playing popular music of that period. After a moment or two, a number of voices begin to sing the tune we hear on the piano. It is all very jolly indeed.*

*Then we hear a girl's voice (it is HAZEL CONWAY'S) calling, loud and clear: "Mother, where shall we put them?" The voice that replies, further off, can only be MRS. CONWAY'S, and she says: "In the back room. Then we'll act out here." To this, HAZEL, who is obviously very excited, screams: "Yes, marvellous!" and then calls to somebody still further away, probably upstairs: "CAROL—in the back room."*

*And now HAZEL dashes in, switching on the light. We see at once that she is a tall, golden young creature, dressed in her very best for this party. She is carrying an armful of old clothes, hats, and odds and ends, all the things that happy people used to dress up in for charades. The room looks very cosy, although it has no doorway, only the large curtained archway on the right. At the back is a window with a step up to it, and a cushioned seat. The curtains are drawn. On the left is a fireplace or an anthracite stove, glowing red. There are several small bookcases against or in the walls, some pieces of fairly good furniture, including a round table and a small bureau, and some passable pictures. It is obviously one of those nondescript rooms, used by the family far more than the drawing-room is, and variously called the Back Room, the Morning Room, the School-room, the Nursery, the Blue, Brown or Red Room. This might easily have been called the Red Room, for in this light it seems to range from pink to plum colour, and it makes a fine cosy setting for the girls in their party dress.*

*Another one has arrived, while HAZEL is dumping her charade things on a round settee in the middle of the room. This is CAROL, the youngest of the Conways—perhaps sixteen—and now terrifically excited, breathless, and almost tottering beneath a load of charade stuff, including a cigar-box gloriously filled with old false whiskers and noses, spectacles, and what not. With all the reckless haste of a*

*child she bangs down all this stuff, and starts to talk, although she has no breath left. And now—after adding that CAROL is an enchanting young person—we can leave them to explain themselves.*

CAROL (*gasping but triumphant*): I've found—the box—with all the false whiskers and things in——

HAZEL (*triumphantly*): I knew it hadn't been thrown away.

CAROL: Nobody'd dare to throw it away. (*Holds it out, with lid open.*) Look! (*HAZEL makes a grab at it.*) Don't snatch!

HAZEL (*not angrily*): Well, I must look, mustn't I, idiot? (*They both, like children, eagerly explore the contents of the box.*) Bags I this one. (*She fishes out a large drooping moustache.*) Oo—and this! (*Fishes out very bulbous false nose.*)

CAROL (*an unselfish creature*): All right, but don't take *all* the good ones, Hazel. Kay and Madge will want some. I think Kay ought to have *first* choice. After all, it's *her* birthday—and you know how she adores charades. Mother won't want any of these because she'd rather look grand, wouldn't she? Spanish or Russian or something. What are you doing?

*HAZEL has turned aside to fasten on the nose and moustache, and now has managed it, though they are not very secure. She now turns round.*

HAZEL (*in deep voice*): Good morning, good morning.

CAROL (*with a scream of delight*): Mr. Pennyman! You know, Hazel, at the paper shop? The one who hates Lloyd George and wags his head very slowly all the time he tells you Lloyd George is no good. Do Mr. Pennyman, Hazel. Go on.

HAZEL (*in her ordinary voice, incongruous*): I couldn't, Carol. I've only seen him about twice. I never go to the paper shop.

*ALAN looks in, grinning when he sees HAZEL. He is a shy, quiet, young man, in his earlier twenties, who can have a slight stammer. He is dressed, rather carelessly, in ordinary clothes. CAROL turns and sees him.*

CAROL: Alan, come in, and don't let the others see. (*As he does.*) Isn't she *exactly* like Mr. Pennyman at the paper shop, the one who hates Lloyd George?

ALAN (*grinning shyly*): She is—a bit.

HAZEL (*in a fantastic deep voice*): "I hate Lloyd George."

ALAN: No, he doesn't talk like that, Hazel.

CAROL: Not the least little bit. He says (*with a rather good imitation of a thick, semi-educated man's voice*): "I'll tell you what it is—Mish

Conway—that there Lloyd George—they're going to be shorry they ever put 'im where they did—shee?"

ALAN (*grinning*): Yes, that's him. Very good, Carol.

CAROL (*excitedly*): I think I ought to be an actress. They said at school I was the best Shylock they'd ever had.

HAZEL (*taking off the nose and moustache*): You can have these if you like, Carol.

CAROL (*taking them*): Are you sure you don't want them? I don't think you ought to dress up as a silly man because you're so pretty. Perhaps I could wear these and do Mr. Pennyman. Couldn't we bring him into the third syllable somehow? Instead of a general. I think we've had enough generals.

ALAN: We have. Ask Kay to work in Mr. Pennyman instead.

HAZEL: Kay ought to be here now, planning everything.

ALAN: She's coming in. Mother told me to tell you not to make too much of a mess in here.

CAROL: You *must* have a mess with charades. It's part of it.

HAZEL: And just wait till mother starts dressing up. She makes more mess than anybody. (*To ALAN.*) I hope some of the old ones are going now. Are they?

ALAN: Yes.

HAZEL: It's much more fun without them. And mother daren't let herself go while they're still here. Tell Kay and Madge to come in, Alan.

ALAN: Right.

*Goes out. The two girls begin turning the clothes over. HAZEL picks out some old-fashioned women's things and holds them up or against herself.*

HAZEL: Look at these! Could you believe people *ever* wore such ridiculous things?

CAROL: I can just remember mother in that, can't you?

HAZEL: Of course I can, infant!

CAROL (*more soberly, looking at man's old-fashioned shooting or Norfolk coat*): That was Daddy's, wasn't it?

HAZEL: Yes. I believe he wore it—that very holiday.

CAROL: Perhaps we ought to put it away.

HAZEL: I don't think mother would mind—now.

CAROL: Yes she would. And I know I would. I don't want anybody to dress up and be funny in the coat father wore just before

he was drowned. (*She has now folded the coat, and puts it on the window-seat. Then, as she returns.*) I wonder if it's very horrible being drowned.

HAZEL (*impatiently*): Oh, don't start that all over again, Carol. Don't you remember how you used to go on asking that—until mother was furious?

CAROL: Yes—but I was only a kid then.

HAZEL: Well, now that you think you aren't a kid any longer, just stop it.

CAROL: It was the coat that made me remember. You see, Hazel, to be talking and laughing and all jolly, just the same as usual—and then, only half an hour afterwards—to be drowned—it's so horrible. It seemed awfully quick to us—but perhaps to him, there in the water, it may have seemed to take ages——

HAZEL: Oh, stop it, Carol. Just when we're having some fun. Why do you?

CAROL: I don't know. But don't you often feel like that? Just when everything is very jolly and exciting, I suddenly think of something awfully serious, sometimes horrible—like Dad drowning—or that little mad boy I once saw with the *huge head*—or that old man who walks in the Park with that great lump growing out of his face——

HAZEL (*stopping her ears*): No, I'm not listening. I'm not listening.

CAROL: They pop up right in the middle of the jolly stuff, you know, Hazel. It happens to Kay, too. So it must be in the family—a bit.

*Enter MADGE. She is a year or two older than HAZEL, not so pretty, and a far more serious and responsible person. She has been to Girton, and already done a little teaching, and you feel all this in her brisk, decided, self-confident manner. She is, too, an earnest enthusiast.*

MADGE: You found them? Good. (*Looks over the things.*) I didn't think we'd have so many old things left. Mother ought to have given them away.

HAZEL: I'm glad she didn't. Besides, who'd have had them?

MADGE: Lots of people would have been glad of them. You never realise, Hazel, how wretchedly poor most people are. It just doesn't occur to you, does it?

HAZEL (*not crossly*): Don't be schoolmistressy, Madge.

CAROL (*who is trying things on, turning to point at MADGE impishly*): Has Gerald Thornton arrived?

MADGE: As a matter of fact, he has—a few minutes ago.

CAROL (*triumphantly*): I knew it. I could see it in your eye, Madge.

MADGE: Don't be absurd. He's brought another man with him, a new client of his, who's desperately anxious to know this family.

HAZEL: So he ought to be. Nice?

MADGE: Oh—a funny little man.

CAROL (*dancing about*): That's just what we want—a funny little man. Perfect for charades.

MADGE: No, not that kind. In fact, he probably hasn't any sense of humour. Very shy, so far, and terrified of mother. Very much the little business man, I should think.

CAROL: Is he a profiteer—like the ones in *Punch*?

MADGE: He looks as if he might be, some day. His name's Ernest Beevers.

HAZEL (*giggling*): What a silly name! I'm sorry for his wife, if he has one.

MADGE: I gather he hasn't. Look here, we ought to be starting. (*Enter KAY, whose twenty-first birthday party this is. An intelligent, sensitive girl, who need not be as pretty as HAZEL. She has a sheet of paper.*) Kay, we ought to be starting.

KAY: I know. The others are coming. (*Begins rooting among the things.*) Some good costumes here, ladies. Oo—look! (*She has fished out some absurd old-fashioned woman's cape, cloak or coat, and hat, and throws them on ridiculously, then stands apart and strikes absurd melodramatic attitude and speaks in false stilted tone.*) One moment, Lord What's-your-name. If I am discovered here, who will believe that my purpose in coming here to-night—visiting your—er—rooms—er unaccompanied—was solely to obtain the—er papers—that will enable me to clear—er—my husband's name, the name of a man who—er—has asked nothing better than the—er privilege of serving his country—and ours too, Lord Thingumtibob—one who—that is—to whom—— (*In ordinary tone.*) No, I'm getting all tied up. You know, we ought to have had a scene like that, all grand and dramatic and full of papers.

MADGE: Well, what *are* we to have?

HAZEL (*coolly*): I've forgotten the word.

CAROL (*indignantly*): Hazel, you're the *limit*! And we spent hours working it out!

HAZEL: I didn't. Only you and Kay, just because you fancy yourselves as budding authoresses and actresses.

KAY (*severely*): The word—idiot!—is *Pussyfoot*. Puss. See Foot. Then the whole word.

MADGE: I think four scenes are too many. And they'll easily guess it.

KAY: That doesn't matter. It makes them happy if they guess it.

CAROL (*rather solemnly*): The great thing is—to *dress up*.

*Enter MRS. CONWAY. She is a charming woman in her middle forties, very nicely dressed, with an easy, vivacious manner.*

MRS. C.: Now I'm ready—if you are. What a mess you're making. I knew you would. Let me see. (*Dives into the clothes, and scatters them far more wildly than the others have done. She finally fishes out a Spanish shawl and mantilla.*) Ah—here they are. Now I shall be a Spanish beauty. I know a song for it, too. (*Begins putting the Spanish things on.*)

HAZEL (*to KAY*): What did I tell you?

MRS. C. (*who is specially fond of HAZEL*): What did you tell her, darling?

HAZEL: I told Kay, whatever she arranged, you'd insist on doing your Spanish turn.

MRS. C.: Well, why not?

KAY: It doesn't come into the scenes I'd thought of, that's all.

MRS. C. (*busy with her costume*): Oh—you can easily arrange that, dear—you're so clever. I've just been telling Dr. Halliday and his niece how clever you are. They seemed surprised, I can't imagine why.

HAZEL: It's the first time I've seen Monica Halliday out of her land girl costume. I'm surprised she didn't turn up to-night in her trousers and leggings.

KAY: She looks quite queer out of them, doesn't she? Rather like a female impersonator.

MADGE: Oh, come on, Kay. What do we do?

KAY: The first scene, *Puss*, is an old lady who's lost her cat. She's really a kind of witch.

CAROL (*happily*): I'm to be the old lady.

*CAROL begins finding suitable clothes—an old shawl, etc.—and some white hair—for the old lady. And during following dialogue, converts herself into a very creditable imitation.*

KAY: Mother, you and Hazel are her two daughters who are visiting her—

HAZEL: I know my bit. I keep saying "I always hated that terrible cat of yours, Mother." What can I wear? (*Pokes about.*)

MRS. C. (*now Spanish*): Well, that's all right, dear. I'll be the Spanish daughter, you see.

KAY (*resignedly*): She didn't have a Spanish daughter, but I suppose it doesn't matter.

MRS. C.: Not in the least. Nobody cares. And then I think I'd better not appear in the others, because I suppose you'll be wanting me to sing afterwards.

KAY: Of course. But I'd put you down for two more. Madge and Joan Helford will have to do those.

MRS. C.: What a pity Robin isn't here! You know, Madge, he wrote and said he might be demobbed any day now, and it seems such a shame just to miss Kay's party. Robin loves parties. He's like me. Your father never cared for them much. Suddenly, right in the middle, just when everything was getting along, he'd want to be quiet—and take me into a corner and ask me how much longer people were staying—just when they were beginning to enjoy themselves. I never could understand that.

KAY: I can. I've often felt like that.

MRS. C.: But why, dear, why? It isn't sensible. If you're having a party, you're having a party.

KAY (*earnestly*): Yes, it isn't that. And it isn't that you suddenly dislike the people. But you feel—at least I do, and I suppose that's what father felt too—you feel, quite suddenly, that it isn't *real* enough—and you want something to be *real*. Do you see, Mother?

MRS. C.: No I don't, my dear. It sounds a little morbid to me. But your father could be quite morbid sometimes—you mightn't think so, but he could—and I suppose you take after him.

KAY (*very gravely*): Do you think that sometimes, in a mysterious sort of way, he *knew*?

MRS. C. (*not too attentive to this*): Knew *what*, dear? Look at Hazel, doesn't she look rather sweet? I can remember where I first wore those things. Absurd! Knew *what*?

KAY: Knew what was going to happen to him. You know, Alan said that some of the men he knew who were killed in the trenches seemed to know sometimes that they were going to be killed, as if a kind of shadow fell over them. Just as if—now and then—we could see round the corner—into the future.

MRS. C. (*easily*): You have the most extraordinary ideas. You must try and put some of them into your book. Are you happy, darling?

KAY: Yes, Mother. Very happy.

MRS. C.: That's all right then. I want you to have a lovely birthday. I feel we all can be happy again, now that the horrible war's all over and people are sensible again, and Robin and Alan are quite safe. I forgot to ask—did Robin send you anything, Kay?

KAY: No. I didn't expect him to.

MRS. C.: Oh—but that isn't like Robin, you know, Kay. He's a most generous boy, much too generous really. Now that may mean he thinks he's coming home very soon.

*Enter ALAN with JOAN HELFORD, who is HAZEL's friend and the same age, pretty and rather foolish.*

KAY: Alan, tell them we're beginning—and it's three syllables.

ALAN goes.

JOAN: I think you all look marvellous. I'm rotten at this, you know, Kay. Don't say I didn't warn you.

KAY: Now then, Carol, you start. And remember, only say "Puss" once. Don't you two say it—only Carol. (ALAN returns. CAROL goes out—and there can be the sound of distant laughing and clapping.) Good old Carol. Now then—you two. (Almost pushes them off.) Now the next syllable is S.Y. So I thought it wouldn't be cheating too badly if we called that "sy". Y'know, Cockney—"I sy, Bert." So this is an East End scene. Madge, you're the old mother.

MADGE (who has started putting on very droll shabby clothes): Yes, I remembered.

ALAN: What am I? I forget.

KAY: You're Bert. Just put something silly on. Is there anything here you can wear, Joan?

*During following dialogue, they all dress up.*

JOAN: I was in London last week, staying with my uncle, and we went to the theatre three times. We saw *Tilly of Bloomsbury* and *Cinderella Man* and *Kissing Time*. I liked *Cinderella Man* best—Owen Nares, y'know. I thought Robin was coming home soon.

KAY: He is.

JOAN: He's an officer, isn't he? You weren't an officer, were you, Alan?

ALAN: No, I was a lance-corporal. One stripe, y'know. Nothing at all.

JOAN: Didn't you want to be anything better than that?

ALAN: No.

KAY: Alan has no ambition at all. Have you, my pet?

ALAN (simply): Not much.

JOAN: If I were a man, I'd want to be very important. What are you doing now, Alan? Somebody said you were at the Town Hall.

ALAN: I am. In the Rate Office. Just a clerk, y'know.

JOAN: Isn't it dull?

ALAN: Yes.

KAY: Alan never minds being dull. I believe he has tremendous long adventures inside his head that nobody knows anything about.

JOAN: Hazel says you've started to write another novel, Kay. Have you?

KAY (*rather curtly*): Yes.

JOAN: I don't know how you can—I mean, I think I'd be all right once I'd started properly—but I can't see how you start. What did you do with the last one?

KAY: Burnt it.

JOAN: Why?

KAY: It was putrid.

JOAN: But wasn't that an awful waste of time?

KAY: Yes, I suppose so.

ALAN: Still, look at the time you and I waste, Joan.

JOAN: Oh—no—I'm always doing *something*. Even though I haven't to go to the canteen any more, I'm always busy. (MADGE, *who has withdrawn herself a little, now laughs.*) Why do you laugh, Madge?

MADGE: Can't a girl laugh?

JOAN (*humbly*): You always did laugh at me, Madge. I suppose because I'm not clever, like you.

HAZEL *returns, letting in noise—laughing and clapping—from outside.*

HAZEL: Well, you can imagine what happened. Mother let herself go, and of course it became all Spanish. I don't believe they'll ever remember hearing "puss" mentioned. What are you supposed to be, Joan?

JOAN (*hopefully*): A sort of Coster girl.

HAZEL: You look a sort of general mess. Oh—(*to KAY*) Carol wants to do Mr. Pennyman at the paper shop instead of a general for the third syllable.

KAY: How can she? If it's soldiers drilling, you can't have Mr. Pennyman. Unless we make him another soldier—and get Gerald Thorton or somebody to be a general.

CAROL *returns, very hot and flushed, and begins taking off her old woman's disguise.*

CAROL: Mother's still on. Golly!—it's baking being an old witch.

KAY: Do you insist on being Mr. Pennyman in the third syllable?

CAROL (*brightening up*): Oo—I'd forgotten that. Yes, please let me do Mr. Pennyman, Kay—my lamb, my love, my precious—

KAY: All right. But he'll have to be a soldier. Just joined up, you see.

*Enter MRS. C. very grand, flushed, triumphant. She is carrying a glass of claret cup.*

MRS. C.: Well—really—that was very silly—but they seemed to enjoy it, and that's the great thing. I thought you were very good, Carol. (*To KAY.*) Carol was sweet, Kay. Now don't ask me to do any more of this, because really I mustn't, especially if you want me to sing afterwards. So leave me out, Kay. (*Begins to sip cup.*)

KAY: All right. Now come on. (*Begins shepherding her players, MADGE, ALAN, JOAN.*)

JOAN: Honestly, Kay, I'll be awful.

KAY: It doesn't matter. You've nothing to do. Now then—Madge.

MADGE (*loudly, in laborious imitation of Cockney mother*): Nah then, Bert. End yew, Dy-sy. Cem along or we'll be lite. (*Leads the way off, followed by other three.*)

HAZEL: How on earth did you get that claret cup, Mother?

MRS. C. (*complacently*): Got Gerald Thornton to hand it to me—and it rounded off my little scene nicely. I don't want any more. Would you like it?

HAZEL *takes it, and sips while removing things. They are all removing things.*

CAROL: Mother, you weren't going to be an *actress*, were you—just a singer?

MRS. C.: I don't know what you mean by *just* a singer. I was a singer certainly. But I did some acting too. When the Newlingham Amateur Operatic first did *Merrie England*, I played Bess. And I'd had all you children then. *You* were only about two, Carol.

HAZEL: Mother, Joan *did* stay in London last week, and she went to three theatres.

MRS. C.: She has relatives there, and we haven't. That makes a great difference.

HAZEL: Aren't we *ever* going?

MRS. C.: Yes, of course. Perhaps Robin will take us—I mean, just you and me—when he comes back.

CAROL (*solemnly*): It says in the paper this morning that We Must All Get On With Our Jobs. This Mere Rush For Amusement has gone on long enough now. There's Work Waiting To Be Done.

HAZEL (*indignantly*): A fat lot of rushing for amusement we've done, haven't we? I think that's frightfully unfair and idiotic. Just

when we *might* have some fun, after washing up in canteens and hospitals and queueing for foul food, with *nobody* about at all, they go and say we've had enough amusement and must get on with our jobs. What jobs?

CAROL: Rebuilding a shattered world. It said that too.

MRS. C. (*half lightly, half not, to HAZEL*): Your job will be to find a very nice young man and marry him. And *that* oughtn't to be difficult—for you.

CAROL (*now getting into trousers to play Mr. Pennyman*): Hurry up, Hazel, and then I can be a bridesmaid. I believe you're my *only* chance. Kay says she won't get married for *ages*, if ever, because her Writing—Her Work—must come first.

MRS. C.: That's nonsense, my dear. When the proper young man comes along, she'll forget about her writing.

CAROL: I don't believe she will, Mother. And anyhow, she won't have bridesmaids. And if Madge ever marries, I know it will be to some kind of Socialist in a tweed suit, who'll insist on being married in a Register Office——

HAZEL: I'm not so sure about that. I've had my eye on Madge lately.

CAROL (*now as Mr. Pennyman*): And I've 'ad my eye on Lloyd George. An' what for, Mish Conway? Bee-corsh yew can't trusht that little Welshman. Yew watch 'im, that'sh all I shay——

MRS. C.: That's *very* good, dear. You're rather like Mr. Worsnop—do you remember him—the cashier at the works? Every New Year's Eve, your father used to bring Mr. Worsnop here, after they'd done all the books at the office, and used to give him some port. And when I went in, Mr. Worsnop always stood and held his glass like this (*she holds glass close to herself in a rather cringing attitude*) and say "My respects, Mrs. Conway, my deepest respects." And I always wanted to laugh. He's retired now, and gone to live in South Devon.

*After slight pause, MADGE, still in absurd old Costerwoman disguise, enters with GERALD THORNTON. He is in his early thirties, a solicitor and son of a solicitor, and is fairly tall and good-looking, and carefully dressed. He has a pleasant, man-of-the-world air, very consciously cultivated. MADGE is arguing hotly, with all the fiery slapdash of enthusiastic youth.*

MADGE: But what the miners want and ask for is simply nationalisation. They say, if coal is as important as you say it is, then the mines shouldn't be in the hands of private owners any longer. Nationalise them, they say. That's the fairest thing.

GERALD: All right. But supposing we don't want them nationalised.

What then? Some of us have seen enough of Government mismanagement already.

MRS. C.: Quite so, Gerald. Everybody knows how ridiculous they were. Sending bags of sand to Egypt!

MADGE (*hotly*): I don't believe half those stories. Besides they had to improvise everything in a hurry. And anyhow it wasn't a *Socialist* Government.

GERALD (*mildly*): But you don't know they'd be any better. They might be worse—less experience.

MADGE (*same tone*): Oh—I know that *experience*! We're always having that flung in our faces. When all that's wanted is a little intelligence—and enthusiasm—and—and decency.

GERALD (*to MRS. C. rather as one adult to another at children's party*): I've been conscripted for the next scene. To be a general or something.

HAZEL: We haven't fancy dress for you.

GERALD: Good!

MRS. C.: I really mustn't neglect them any longer, must I? And most of them will be going soon. Then we can have a nice cosy little party of our own.

*Goes out.*

CAROL (*to GERALD*): Well, you must look different somehow, you know. You could turn your coat inside out.

GERALD: I don't think that would be very effective.

CAROL (*impatiently*): Wear an overcoat then. Oh—and—— (*Fishes out a large false moustache and gives it to him.*) Put this on. That's a very good one.

GERALD *takes and looks at it dubiously.* JOAN *rushes in, more animated now her ordeal is over.*

JOAN (*excitedly, girlish*): Hazel, d'you know who's here? You'll never guess!

HAZEL: Who?

JOAN (*ignoring this*): That *awful* little man who always stares at you—the one who followed us once all round the Park——

HAZEL: He's *not*!

JOAN: He is, I tell you. I distinctly saw him, standing at the side, near the door.

GERALD: This sounds like my friend Beevers.

HAZEL: Do you mean to say the man you brought is *that* awful little man? Well, you're the absolute limit, Gerald Thornton! He's a

*dreadful* little creature. Every time I go out, he's somewhere about, staring and staring at me. And now you bring him here!

GERALD (*not worried by this outburst*): Oh—he's not so bad. He insisted on my bringing him, and your mother said it was all right. You shouldn't be so devastating, Hazel.

JOAN (*giggly*): I told you he must be mad about you, Hazel.

HAZEL (*the haughty beauty now*): I swear I won't speak to him. He just would butt in like this!

CAROL: Why shouldn't he, poor little manny?

HAZEL: Shut up, Carol, you don't know anything about him.

*Enter KAY and ALAN.*

KAY: That wasn't much good. The Costers were a wash-out. Oh—that's all right, Carol. Now you're a general, Gerald, and the others are recruits. Hurry up, Alan, and put something different on. Gerald, you're inspecting them—you know, make up something silly—and then say to one of them: Look at your *foot*, my man." Anyhow, bring in "foot".

GERALD: Have I only two recruits, Carol and Alan?

KAY: No, mother's sending in another man. They aren't guessing anything yet, but that's simply because it's all such a muddle. I don't think I like charades as much as I used to do. Dad was marvellous at them. (*To GERALD.*) He always did very fat men. You'd better be a fat general. And you can be fat, too, Alan.

*Piano can be heard playing softly off. As the men are stuffing cushions under coats, and JOAN and KAY and MADGE are finishing removing their last things, ERNEST BEEVERS enters slowly and shyly. He is a little man, about thirty, still socially shy and awkward, chiefly because his social background is rather lower in the scale than that of the CONWAYS, but there is a suggestion of growing force and self-confidence in him. He is obviously attracted towards the whole family, but completely fascinated by HAZEL.*

ERNEST (*shyly, awkwardly*): Oh—er—Mrs. Conway told me to come in here.

KAY: Yes, of course. You've to be one of the recruits in this next bit.

ERNEST: I'm—not much good—at this sort of thing—you know—

KAY: It doesn't matter. Just be silly.

GERALD: Oh—Beevers—sorry! I'd better introduce you. (*Carries off slightly awkward situation with determined light touch.*) This—is Mr. Ernest Beevers, a rather recent arrival in our—er—progressive

city. Now all these are Conways, except this young lady—Miss Joan Helford——

ERNEST (*seriously*): How d'you do?

JOAN (*faintly giggly*): How d'you do?

GERALD: This is Kay, who decided to be twenty-one to-day so that we could have this party——

ERNEST: Many happy returns.

KAY (*nicely*): Thank you.

GERALD: She's the literary genius of this distinguished family. Over there is Madge, who's been to Girton and will try to convert you to Socialism.

ERNEST: I'm afraid she won't succeed.

GERALD: This strange-looking middle-aged person is young Carol——

CAROL (*nicely*): Hello!

ERNEST (*grateful for this, smiling*): Hello!

GERALD: Alan I think you've met already. (*Teasing.*) Oh—and let me see—yes, this is Hazel. She creates such havoc that when the Leicesters were stationed here the Colonel wrote and asked her to stay indoors when they had route marches.

ERNEST (*solemnly*): How d'you do?

HAZEL (*crossly*): Don't be idiotic, Gerald. (*Very quickly to ERNEST.*) How d'you do?

*Faint giggle from JOAN.*

ALAN (*to ERNEST*): You'd better do something funny to yourself. Is there anything here you'd like?

*ERNEST pokes about in the things, while HAZEL looks disdainfully on and JOAN wants to giggle. ERNEST is very clumsy now.*

KAY: Carol and Alan, you start. You're recruits. Carol can do bits of Mr. Pennyman to fill in.

*CAROL, followed by ALAN, goes out. GERALD is waiting for BEEVERS. KAY goes out.*

JOAN: What did your mother say, Hazel, about removing?

HAZEL: Oh, of course, she won't think of it. And she's been offered five thousand pounds—*five thousand*—for this house!

ERNEST (*the business man*): Tell her to take it. I'll bet in ten years she couldn't get two thousand. It's only this temporary shortage that's forced prices of property up. You'll see 'em come down with a bang yet.

HAZEL (*snubbing him*): But she adores being here, of course, and so it's hopeless.

ERNEST *realises he has been snubbed. He has now made a few ridiculous changes in his clothes. He looks hard at HAZEL, who will not return his look. JOAN still giggly.*

ERNEST (*with dignity which ill assorts with his appearance*): If I spoke out of my turn, I'm sorry.

KAY (*looking in*): Hurry up, Mr. Beevers.

ERNEST (*hurrying forward*): I'm no good at this, you know, Miss Conway, and it's no use pretending I am——

*But she rushes him and GERALD off, and follows them. JOAN bursts into a peal of laughter.*

HAZEL (*indignantly*): I don't think it's funny, Joan. I'm *furios*.

JOAN (*between gurgles and gasps*): He—looked—so—silly.

HAZEL *begins laughing, too, and they laugh together, rocking round.*

HAZEL (*hardly distinguishable*): Did you hear him? "If I spoke out of my turn, I'm sorry."

JOAN (*hardly distinguishable*): We ought to have said "Pleased to meet you," and then he'd have said "Granted."

KAY *comes back, and looks rather severely at these two.*

KAY (*severely*): I think you were rather beastly to that little man.

*They still laugh, and as she looks at them KAY begins to laugh too. They all laugh.*

HAZEL (*coming to*): Oh—dear! Oh—dear! But that's the little man I told you about, Kay, who always stared, and once followed us round.

KAY: Well, now he'll be able to raise his little hat.

HAZEL (*vehemently*): And that's all he'll jolly well get out of this, I'll tell you. And I think Gerald Thornton had the cheek of the devil to bring him here. Just because he's a new client.

JOAN (*still giggly*): You don't think you'll marry him then, Hazel?

HAZEL: Ugh! I'd just as soon marry a—a ferret.

KAY (*rather loftily*): I don't believe you two ever think or talk about anything but clothes and going to London and young men and marriage.

HAZEL (*not too rudely*): Oh, don't you start being so grand! (*Quotes dramatically.*) *The Garden of Stars.*

KAY (*hastily*): Now, shut up, Hazel!

HAZEL (*to JOAN*): That's what she called the last novel she started.

*The Garden of Stars.* And there were so many bits of paper with the opening words on that I know them off by heart. (*Quotes dramatically. As soon as she begins KAY makes a rush at her, but she dodges, still quoting.*) "Marion went out into the still smooth night. There was no moon but already—already—the sky was silver-dusted with stars. She passed through the rose garden, the dying scent of the roses meeting the grey moths——"

KAY (*shouting her down*): I know it's all wrong, but I tore it up, didn't I?

HAZEL (*mildly*): Yes, my duck. And then you cried.

KAY (*fiercely*): I've just began a real one. With some *guts* in it. You'll see.

HAZEL: I'll bet it's about a girl who lives in a town just like New-lingham.

KAY (*still fierce*): Well, why shouldn't it be? You wait, that's all.

GERALD, *plus false moustache*, ALAN and ERNEST *in their absurd get-up* come in slowly and solemnly.

GERALD: That's true, Alan.

ERNEST (*seriously*): But they can't expect people to behave differently when they've still got their war restrictions on everything. They can't have it both ways.

GERALD: Well, there's still a lot of profiteering.

ERNEST: You've got to let business find its own level. The more interference the worse it is.

ALAN: The worse for everybody?

ERNEST (*decidedly*): Yes.

ALAN (*stoutly, for him*): I doubt it.

ERNEST (*not too unpleasantly*): You're working in the Town Hall, aren't you? Well, you can't learn much about these things there, y'know.

KAY (*with tremendous irony*): I say! You three must have been terribly good in the charade, weren't you?

ALAN: No, we weren't very amusing.

CAROL (*who has just entered*): Oh—they were awful. No, you weren't *too* bad, Mr. Beevers, especially for a man who was doing a charade in a strange house.

ERNEST: Now I call that handsome, Miss Carol.

KAY (*briskly*): The whole word now. *Pussyfoot*. It's supposed to be a party in America, and we can't have anything to drink. We won't bother dressing up for this. Just some good *acting*. I'll say the word.

Joan, tell Madge, she's in this. Just the girls, for the grand finale.

JOAN goes.

GERALD (*now normal again*): So we're sacked?

KAY: Yes. No good.

GERALD: Then we can give ourselves a drink. We've earned a drink. Any dancing afterwards?

KAY: There might be, after mother's done her singing.

GERALD: Do you dance, Beevers?

ERNEST: No, never had time for it.

HAZEL (*significantly, in loud clear tone*): Yes, we *must* have some dancing, Gerald.

ERNEST *looks hard at her. She gives him a wide innocent stare of complete indifference. He nods, turns and goes. GERALD, after distributing a smile or two, follows him. CAROL is busy getting out of her Mr. Pennyman disguise.*

CAROL (*excitedly*): Kay, we could have done the Prince of Wales in America for this last scene. Why didn't we think of it? You could be the Prince of Wales, and you could fall in love with Hazel, who could turn out to be Pussyfoot's daughter.

KAY (*laughing*): Mother'd be shocked. And so would some of the others.

CAROL: I'd hate to be a Prince of Wales, wouldn't you?

HAZEL (*with decision*): I'd love it.

CAROL: Old Mrs. Ferguson—you know, the one with the queer eye—the rather frightening one—told me there was an old prophecy that when King David came to the throne of Britain everything would be wonderful.

*Sound off of a loud shout, then confused voices and laughter.*

KAY: What's that?

HAZEL (*excitedly*): It's Robin.

*They all look up with eager interest. HAZEL moves, but before she gets very far, ROBIN dashes in. He is twenty-three, and a rather dashing, good-looking young man in the uniform of an R.A.F. officer. He is in tremendous spirits. He carries a small package.*

ROBIN (*loudly*): Hello, kids! Hazel! (*Kisses her.*) Kay, many happies! (*Kisses her.*) Carol, my old hearty! (*Kisses her.*) Gosh! I've had a dash to get here in time. Did half the journey on one of our lorries. And I didn't forget the occasion, Kay. What about that? (*Throws her the parcel, which she opens and finds is a silk scarf.*) All right, isn't it?

KAY (*gratefully*): It's lovely, Robin. Lovely, lovely!

ROBIN: That's the stuff to give 'em. And I've finished. Out! Demobbed at last!

HAZEL: Oo—grand! Have you seen mother?

ROBIN: Of course I have, you chump. You ought to have seen her face when I told her I was now a civilian again. Golly! we'll have some fun now, won't we?

KAY: Lots and lots.

CAROL: Have you seen Alan?

ROBIN: Just for a second. Still the solemn old bird, isn't he?

CAROL (*very young and solemn*): In my opinion, Alan is a very wonderful person.

ROBIN (*rattling on*): I know. You always thought that, didn't you? Can't quite see it myself, but I'm very fond of the old crawler. How's the writing, Kay?

KAY: I'm still trying—and learning.

ROBIN: That's the stuff. We'll show 'em. This is where the Conways really begin. How many young men, Hazel?

HAZEL (*calmly*): Nobody to speak of.

CAROL: She'd worked her way up to Colonels, hadn't you, Haze?

KAY (*affectionately*): Now that it's civilians, she's having to change her technique—and she's a bit uncertain yet.

ROBIN: All jealousy that, isn't it, Hazel? (MRS. C. *appears, carrying a tray laden with sandwiches, cake, etc., and some beer.*) A-ha, here we are! (*Rushes to take the tray from her. MRS. C. is very happy now.*)

MRS. C. (*beaming*): Isn't this nice! Now we're all here. I knew somehow you were on your way, Robin, even though you didn't tell us—you naughty boy.

ROBIN: Couldn't, Mother, honestly. Only wangled it at the last minute.

MRS. C. (*to KAY*): Finish your charade now, dear.

ROBIN: Charade! Can I be in this? I used to be an ace at charades.

MRS. C.: No, dear, they're just finishing. We can have as many charades as we want now you're home for good. Have something to eat and talk to me while they're doing the last bit.

KAY (*to HAZEL and CAROL*): Come on, you two. We can collect Madge out there. Remember, it's an American party, and we can't have anything to drink, and then, after kicking up a row, you ask who's giving the party, and then I'll say *Pussyfoot*.

*She is going off and the others following her as she is saying this.*

MRS. C. *hastily puts some of the old clothes together, while* ROBIN *settles down to the tray.* MRS. C. *then comes and watches him eat and drink with maternal delight. Both are happy and relaxed, at ease with each other.*

MRS. C.: Is there anything you want there, Robin?

ROBIN (*mouth full*): Yes thanks, Mother. Gosh, you don't know what it feels like to be out at last!

MRS. C.: I do, you silly boy. What do you think I feel, to have you back at last—for good?

ROBIN: I must get some clothes.

MRS. C.: Yes, some really nice ones. Though it's a pity you can't keep on wearing that uniform. You look so smart in it. Poor Alan—he was only a corporal or something, y'know, and had the most hideous uniform, nothing seemed to fit him—Alan never looked *right* in the Army.

ROBIN: He's got a piffling sort of job at the Town Hall, hasn't he?

MRS. C.: Yes. He seems to like it, though. And perhaps he'll find something better later on.

ROBIN (*eagerly*): I've got all sorts of plans, y'know, Mother. We've all been talking things over in the mess. One of our chaps knows Jimmy White—you know, *the* Jimmy White—you've heard of him—and he thinks he can wangle me an introduction to him. My idea is something in the car and motor-bike line. I understand 'em, and I've heard people are buying like mad. And I have my gratuity, you know.

MRS. C.: Yes, dear, we'll have to talk about all that. There's plenty of time now, thank goodness! Don't you think all the girls are looking well?

ROBIN (*eating and drinking away*): Yes, first-rate, especially Hazel.

MRS. C.: Oh—of course Hazel's the one everybody notices. You ought to have seen the young men. And Kay—twenty-one—I can hardly believe it—but she's *very* grown-up and serious now—I don't know whether she'll make anything out of this writing of hers—but she is trying very hard—don't tease her too much, dear, she doesn't like it——

ROBIN: I haven't been teasing her.

MRS. C.: No, but Hazel does sometimes—and I know what you children are. Madge has been teaching, you know, but she's trying for a much better school.

ROBIN (*indifferently*): Good old Madge. (*With far more interest.*) I think I ought to go up to town for my clothes, Mother. You can't get anything really decent in Newlingham, and if I'm going to start

selling cars I've got to look like somebody who knows a good suit when he sees one. Lord!—it's grand to be back again, and not just on a filthy little leave. (*Breaks off, as he looks at her, standing quite close to him.*) Here, Mother—steady!—nothing to cry about now.

MRS. C. (*through her tears, smiling*): I know. That's why. You see, Robin—losing your father, then the war coming—taking you—I'm not used to happiness. I've forgotten about it. It's upsetting! And Robin, now you are back—don't go rushing off again, *please*! Don't leave us—not for years and years. Let's all be cosy together and happy again, shall we?

JOAN *enters, then stands awkwardly as she sees them together.*

MRS. C. *turns and sees her. So does ROBIN, and his face lights up.*

MRS. C. *sees ROBIN's face, then looks again at JOAN. This should be played for as long as it will stand.*

JOAN (*rather nervously*): Oh—Mrs. Conway—they've finished the charade—and some people are going—and Madge asked me to tell you they're expecting you to sing something.

MRS. C.: Why didn't she come herself?

JOAN (*rather faltering*): She and Kay and Carol began handing people sandwiches and things as soon as they finished the charade.

ROBIN (*rising*): Hello, Joan!

JOAN (*coming forward, thrilled*): Hello, Robin! Is it—nice to be back again?

ROBIN (*smiling, rather significantly*): Yes, of course.

MRS. C. (*rather irritably*): Really this room's a dreadful mess. I knew it would be. Hazel and Carol brought all these things down here. Joan, go and tell them they must take these things upstairs at once. I can't have this room looking like an old clothes' place. Perhaps you'd like to help them, dear.

JOAN: Yes—rather.

*Smiles at ROBIN and goes. MRS. C. turns and looks at him.*

*He smiles at her. She has to smile back.*

ROBIN: You're looking very artful, Mother.

MRS. C.: Am I? I'm not feeling very artful. (*Carefully just.*) Joan's grown up to be a very nice-looking girl, hasn't she?

ROBIN (*smiling*): Quite.

MRS. C. (*same careful tone*): And I think she's got a pleasant easy disposition. Not very clever or go-ahead or anything like that. But a thoroughly *nice* girl.

ROBIN (*not eagerly*): Yes, I'll bet she is.

Helen: *How much longer packing up the things. This should be a time for a good song.*

Helen: *Why not call painting for a song. Mother. They don't even sing in the Church.*

Miss C.: *Why not sing? I was never so stupid as to stop singing out of the house. What have Schubert and Schumann to do with the things I am packing up?*

Conway: *Why not sing? I was never so stupid as to stop singing out of the house. What have Schubert and Schumann to do with the things I am packing up?*

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subtle things—that I *know* she'd feel—and I want my novel to be very real this time—so I had to scribble them down——

CAROL: Will you tell me them afterwards?

KAY: Yes.

CAROL: Bedroom?

KAY: Yes, if you're not too sleepy.

CAROL: I couldn't be. (*She pauses happily, one earnest young creature staring at the other. And now we can just hear MRS. CONWAY in the drawing-room beginning to sing Schumann's "Der Nussbaum". CAROL is now very solemn, a little awed.*) Kay, I think you're wonderful.

KAY (*awed herself*): I think *life's* wonderful.

CAROL: Both of you are.

CAROL goes out, and now we can hear the lovely rippling Schumann better than before. KAY writes for another moment, then moved by both the music and the sudden ecstasy of creation, she puts down pencil and paper, drifts over to the switch and turns out the lights. The room is not in darkness because light is coming in from the hall. KAY goes to the window and opens the curtains, so that when she sits on the window-seat, her head is silvered in moonlight. Very still, she listens to the music, and seems to stare not at but into something, and as the song goes soaring away, the curtain creeps down.

END OF ACT ONE

## ACT II

*When the curtain rises, for a moment we think nothing has happened since it came down, for there is the light coming in from the hall, and there is KAY sitting on the window-seat. But then ALAN comes in and switches on the central light, and we see that a great deal must have happened. It is the same room, but it has a different wall-paper, the furniture has been changed round, the pictures and books are not altogether the same as before. We notice a wireless set. The general effect is harder and rather brighter than it was during the party in 1919, and we guess at once that this is present day (1937). KAY and ALAN are not quite the same, after nearly twenty years. KAY has a rather hard, efficient, well-groomed look, that of a woman of forty who has earned her own living for years. ALAN, in his middle forties, is shabbier than he was before—his coat does not match the rest of his suit and really will not do—but he is still the rather shy, awkward, lovable fellow, only now there is about him a certain quiet poise, an inward certainty and serenity, missing from all the others we shall see now.*

ALAN (*quietly*): Well—Kay.

KAY (*happily*): Alan!

*She jumps up and kisses him. Then they look at one another, smiling a little. He rubs his hands in embarrassment, as he always did.*

ALAN: I'm glad you could come. It was the only thing about this business that didn't make me hate the thought of it—the chance *you* might be able to come. But mother says you're not staying the night.

KAY: I can't, Alan. I must get back to London to-night.

ALAN: Work?

KAY: Yes. I have to go to Southampton in the morning—to write a nice little piece about the newest little film star.

ALAN: Do you often have to do that?

KAY: Yes, Alan, quite often. There are an awful lot of film stars and they're always arriving at Southampton, except when they arrive at Plymouth—damn their eyes! And all the women readers of the *Daily Courier* like to read a bright half-column about their glamorous favourites.

ALAN (*thoughtfully*): They look very nice—but all rather alike.

KAY (*decidedly*): They *are* all rather alike—and so are my bright

interviews with 'em. In fact, sometimes I feel we're all just going round and round, like poor old circus ponies.

ALAN (*after a pause*): Are you writing another novel?

KAY (*very quietly*): No, my dear, I'm not. (*Pauses, then gives short laugh.*) I tell myself too many people are writing novels.

ALAN: Well, it does look like that—sometimes.

KAY: Yes. But that's not the real reason. I still feel mine wouldn't be like theirs—anyhow, not the next, even if the last was. But—as things are—I just can't . . .

ALAN (*after a pause*): The last time you wrote, Kay—I mean to me—you sounded rather unhappy, I thought.

KAY (*with self-reproach*): I was. I suppose that's why I suddenly remembered you—and wrote. Not very flattering—to you—is it?

ALAN (*with cheerful modesty*): In a way it is, y'know. Yes, Kay, I'd take that as a compliment.

KAY (*with sudden burst of affection*): Alan! And I loathe that coat you're wearing. It doesn't match the rest of you, does it?

ALAN (*stammering, apologetic*): No—well, you see—I just wear it in the house—an old coat—just as a house coat—it saves my other one—I oughtn't to have put it on to-night. Just habit, y'know. I'll change it before the others come. . . . Why were you so unhappy then—the last time you wrote?

KAY (*in broken painful phrases*): Something—that was always ending—really did come to an end just then. It had lasted ten years—off and on—and eating more of one's life away when it was off than when it was on. He was married. There were children. It was the usual nasty muddle. (*Breaks off.*) Alan, you don't know what day it is to-day?

ALAN (*chuckling*): But I do, I do. And, of course, Mother did, too. Look!

*He pulls small package out of his pocket and holds it out to her.*

KAY (*after taking it and kissing him*): Alan, you're an angel! I never thought I'd have another single birthday present. And you know how old I am now? Forty. Forty!

ALAN (*smiling*): I'm forty-four. And it's all right, y'know. You'll like it. (*Front door bell rings.*) Look at your present. I hope it's all right.

*Goes to front door. KAY hastily unwraps her parcel and takes out a hideous cheap little handbag. She looks at it and does not know whether to laugh or cry over the thing. Meanwhile ALAN has brought in JOAN, now Joan Conway, for she married ROBIN. Time*

*has not been very kind to her. She is now a rather sloppy, querulous woman of forty-one. Her voice has a very irritating quality.*

JOAN: Hello, Kay. I didn't think you'd manage to be here—you hardly ever do come to Newlingham now, do you? And I must say I don't blame you. (*Breaks off because she notices the awful handbag.*) Oh—what a——

KAY (*hastily*): Nice, isn't it? Alan has just given it to me. How are the children?

JOAN: Richard's very well, but the doctor says Ann's tonsils ought to come out—though he doesn't tell me who's going to pay for the operation, never thinks about that. They did enjoy those things you sent at Christmas, Kay—I don't know what they'd have done without them, though I did my best.

KAY: I'm sure you did, Joan.

JOAN: Alan was very good to them, too, weren't you, Alan? Though, of course, it's not like their having a father. (*Breaks off and looks miserably at KAY.*) You know, I haven't seen Robin for months. Some people say I ought to divorce him—but—I don't know—— (*With sudden misery.*) Honestly, isn't it awful? Oh—Kay. (*Suddenly giggles.*) Doesn't that sound silly—Oh—Kay.

KAY (*wearily*): No, I've stopped noticing it.

JOAN: Richard's always saying Okay—he's heard it at the pictures—and, of course, Ann copies him. (*Breaks off, looks anxiously at them both.*) Do you think it's all right, my coming here to-night? It was Hazel who told me you were having a sort of family meeting, and she thought I ought to be here, and I think so too. But Granny Conway didn't ask me——

KAY (*with a sudden laugh*): Joan, you don't call mother Granny Conway?

JOAN: Well, I got into the habit, y'know, with the children.

KAY: She must loathe it.

ALAN (*apologetically, to JOAN*): I think she does, you know.

JOAN: I must try and remember. Is she upstairs?

ALAN: Yes. Madge is here, too.

JOAN (*nerving herself*): I think—I'll go up and ask her if it's all right—my staying—otherwise I'd feel such a fool.

KAY: Yes, do. And tell her we think you ought to be here—if you want to be——

JOAN: Well, it isn't that—but—you see—if it's about money—I must know something, mustn't I? After all, I'm Robin's wife—and Richard and Ann are his children——

ALAN (*kindly*): Yes, Joan, you tell mother that, if she objects. But she won't, though.

JOAN *looks at them a moment doubtfully, then goes. They watch her go, then look at one another.*

KAY (*lowering her voice a little*): I suppose Robin's pretty hopeless—but really, Joan's such a fool——

ALAN: Yes, but the way Robin's treated her has made her feel more of a fool than she really is. It's taken away all her confidence in herself, you see, Kay. Otherwise she mightn't have been so bad.

KAY: You used to like Joan, didn't you?

ALAN (*looking at her, then slowly smiling*): You remember when she and Robin told us they were engaged? I was in love with her then. It was the only time I ever fell in love with anybody. And I remember—quite suddenly hating Robin—yes, really hating him. None of this loving and hating lasted, of course—it was just silly stuff. But I remember it quite well.

KAY: Suppose it had been you instead of Robin?

ALAN (*hastily*): Oh—no, that wouldn't have done at all. Really it wouldn't. Most unsuitable!

KAY *laughs in affectionate amusement at his bachelor's horror.*  
MADGE *enters. She is very different from the girl of ACT I. She has short greyish hair, wears glasses, and is neatly but severely dressed. She speaks with a dry precision, but underneath her assured schoolmistress manner is a suggestion of the neurotic woman.*

MADGE (*very decisively, as she bustles about the room, finding an envelope and filling her fountain-pen*): I've just told mother that if I hadn't happened to be in the neighbourhood to-day—I've applied for a headship at Borderton, you know, Kay, and had my interview there this afternoon—nothing would have induced me to be here to-night.

KAY: Well, I don't know why you bothered telling her, Madge. You *are* here, that's all that matters.

MADGE: No it isn't. I want her to understand quite clearly that I've no further interest in these family muddles, financial or otherwise. Also, that I would have thought it unnecessary to ask for a day away from my work at Collingfield in order to attend one of these ridiculous hysterical conferences.

KAY: You talk as if you'd been dragged here every few weeks.

MADGE: No I haven't. But I've had a great many more of these silly discussions than you have—please remember, Kay. Mother and Gerald Thornton seem to imagine that the time of a woman journalist in London is far more precious than that of a senior mistress at a large

girls' public school. Why—I can't think. But the result is, I've been dragged in often when you haven't.

KAY (*rather wearily*): All right. But seeing we're both here now, let's make the best of it.

ALAN: Yes, of course.

MADGE: Joan's here. I hope there's no chance of Robin coming too. That's something you've missed so far, I think, Kay. I've had one experience of their suddenly meeting here—Robin half drunk, ready to insult everybody. Joan weeping and resentful—the pair of them discussing every unpleasant detail of their private life—and it's not an experience I want to repeat.

KAY (*lightly, but serious underneath*): I don't blame you, Madge. But for the Lord's sake be human to-night. You're not talking to the Collingfield common room now. This is your nice brother, Alan. I'm your nice sister Kay. We know all about you——

MADGE: That's just where you're wrong. You know hardly anything about me, any of you. The life you don't see—call it the Collingfield common room if that amuses you—is my real life. It represents exactly the sort of person I am now, and what you and Alan and mother remember—and trust mother not to forget anything foolish and embarrassing—is no longer of any importance at all.

KAY: I'd hate to think that, Madge.

ALAN (*shyly, earnestly*): And it isn't true. It really isn't. Because—— (*Hesitates, and is lost.*)

MADGE: I heard your extraordinary views the last time I was here, Alan. I also discussed them with Herrickson—our senior Maths. mistress and a most brilliant woman—and she demolished them very thoroughly.

KAY (*to cheer him up*): You tell me, Alan, if there's time later on. We're not going to be trampled on by any of Madge's Miss What's-her-names. And we don't care how brilliant they are, do we, Alan?

ALAN *grins and rubs his hands*. MADGE *deliberately changes the subject*.

MADGE: I hope you're doing something besides this popular journalism now, Kay. Have you begun another book?

KAY: No.

MADGE: Pity, isn't it?

KAY (*after a pause, looking steadily at her*): What about you, Madge? Are you building Jerusalem—in England's green and pleasant land?

MADGE: Possibly not. But I'm trying to put a little knowledge of

history and a little sense into the heads of a hundred and fifty middle-class girls. It's hard work and useful work. Certainly nothing to be ashamed of.

KAY (*looking hard, speaking very quietly*): Then—why be ashamed?

MADGE (*instantly, loudly*): I'm not.

HAZEL *enters, from outside. She is extremely well dressed, the best dressed of them all, and has not lost her looks, but there is something noticeably subdued, fearful, about her.*

HAZEL: Hello, Madge! (*Sees KAY.*) Kay! (*Kisses her.*)

KAY: Hazel, my dear, you're grander every time I see you.

HAZEL (*preening*): Do you like it?

KAY: Yes—and you didn't get that in Newlingham. At the *Bon Marché*. Do you remember when we used to think the *Bon Marché* marvellous?

HAZEL (*brightening up at this*): Yes—and now they seem ghastly. Well, that's something, isn't it? (*Realises that this gives her away, so hastily asks*): Is Joan here?

ALAN: Yes. She's upstairs with mother. Is Ernest coming to-night?

HAZEL (*hesitating*): I—don't—know.

MADGE: I thought it was understood he was coming. Mother thinks he is. I believe she's rather counting on him.

HAZEL (*hastily*): Well, she mustn't. I've told her not to. I don't even know yet if he'll be here at all.

MADGE (*annoyed*): But this is ridiculous. We're told that things are desperate. Kay and I have to leave our work, travel miles and miles, stop thinking about anything else, and now you don't even know if your own husband will walk down the road to be here.

HAZEL: But you know what Ernest is. He said he *might* come to-night. I asked him again only at lunch time to-day—and he said he didn't know—and then I didn't like——

MADGE (*cutting in sharply*): Didn't like! You mean you *daren't*. That miserable little——

HAZEL: Madge! Please stop.

MADGE *looks at her in contempt, then walks off. HAZEL looks very miserable.*

KAY: How are the children?

HAZEL: Peter has a cold again—poor lamb—he's always getting colds. Margaret's all right. Never *any* trouble with her. She's been doing some ballet dancing, y'know, and the teacher thinks she's

*marvellous* for her age. Oh—you forgot her last birthday, Kay. The child was *so* disappointed.

KAY: I'm sorry. Tell her I'll make up for it at Christmas. I must have been away on a job or something——

HAZEL (*eagerly*): I read your article on Glyrna Foss—you know, about three months ago—when she came over from Hollywood. Did she really say all those things to you, Kay, or did you make them up?

KAY: She said some of them. The rest I made up.

HAZEL (*eagerly*): Did she say anything about Leo Frobisher—her husband, y'know, and they'd just separated?

KAY: Yes, but I didn't print it.

HAZEL (*all eagerness now*): What did she say?

KAY: She said (*imitating very bad type of American voice*), "I'll bet that God-forgotten left-over ham husband of mine gets himself poured out o' the next boat." (*Normal voice, dryly.*) You'd like her, Hazel. She's a sweet child.

HAZEL: She sounds awful, but I suppose you can't judge by the way they talk, using all that slang. And I know you don't think you're very lucky, Kay——

KAY: I vary. Sometimes when I manage to remember what most women go through, all kinds of women all over the world, I don't think, I *know* I'm lucky. But usually—I feel clean out of luck.

HAZEL: I know, that's what I say. But I think you're *very* lucky, meeting all these people, and being in London and all that. Look at me, still in Newlingham, and I *loathe* Newlingham, and it gets worse and worse. Doesn't it, Alan—though I don't suppose you notice?

ALAN: I think it's about the same—perhaps we get worse, that's all.

HAZEL (*looking at him in a sort of impersonal fashion*): Somebody was saying to me only the other day how queer they thought you were, Alan, and you are—really, aren't you? I mean you don't seem to bother about everything as most people do. I've often wondered whether you're happy inside or just dull. But I often wonder about people like that—(*to KAY*) don't you? Though I suppose being so clever now, and a writer and everything, you *know* about them. But I don't. And I simply can't tell from what people look like. We had a maid, y'know, Jessie, and she seemed such a cheerful little thing—always smiling and humming—Ernest used to get quite cross with her—she was *too* cheerful really—and then suddenly she took over twenty aspirins all at once, we had to have the doctor and everything, and she said it was simply because she couldn't bear it any longer—she'd had enough of *everything*, she said. Isn't it strange?

KAY: But you must feel like that sometimes, don't you?

HAZEL: Yes, I do. But I'm always surprised when other people do, because somehow they never *look* it. Oh——(*gets up and lowers her voice*) Robin rang me up yesterday—he's living in Leicester just now, you know—and I told him about to-night—and he said he might look in because he wouldn't be far away.

ALAN: I hope he doesn't.

KAY: What's he doing now, Hazel?

HAZEL: I don't know really—he's always changing, y'know—but it's something to do with commission. Shall I tell Joan he might be coming here?

KAY: No. Risk it.

*Doesn't say any more because MRS. CONWAY comes in now, followed by JOAN. MRS. CONWAY is now a woman of sixty-five, and has not gone neat and modern, but kept to her full-blown Edwardian type.*

MRS. C. (*who is still very brisk*): Now then, Hazel, haven't you brought Ernest with you?

HAZEL: No, Mother. I hope—he'll be here soon.

MRS. C.: Of course he will. Well, we can't do anything until Gerald arrives. He knows how things are—exactly. Where's Madge?

KAY: I thought she went upstairs.

MRS. C. (*as she goes to turn on more lights*): She's probably taking something in the bathroom. I've never known anybody who took so many things as poor Madge. She's given herself so many lotions and gargles and sprays that no man has ever looked twice at her—poor thing. Alan, I think we ought to have both port and whisky out, don't you? I told the girl to leave it all ready in the dining-room. Better bring it in. (*ALAN goes out, returning, during following dialogue, carrying a tray, with port and small glasses, whisky and soda and tumblers.*) Now what I'm wondering is this—should we all sit round looking very stiff and formal—y'know, make it a proper business affair, because, after all, it is a business affair—or should we make everybody comfortable and *cosy*? What do you think?

KAY: I think—Mother—you're enjoying this.

MRS. C.: Well, after all, why shouldn't I? It's nice to see all you children at home again. Even Madge. (*MADGE enters. MRS. C. probably saw her before, but undoubtedly sees her now.*) I say it's nice to see all you children home again—even you, Madge.

MADGE: I'm not a child and this is no longer my home.

MRS. C. (*sharply*): You were a child once—and a very trouble-

some one too—and for twenty years this was your home—and please don't talk in that tone to me. You're not in a classroom now, remember.

HAZEL: Now—Mother—please—it's not going to be easy to-night—and——

MADGE (*coldly*): Don't worry, Hazel. Mother *enjoys* things not being easy.

*She sits down. MRS. C. observes her maliciously, then turns to KAY.*

MRS. C.: Kay, *who* was the man the Philipsons saw you dining with at the—what's the name of that restaurant?

KAY: The Ivy, Mother. And the man is a man called Hugo Steel. I've told you already.

MRS. C. (*smoothly*): Yes, dear, but you didn't tell me much. The Philipsons said you seemed awfully friendly together. I suppose he's an old friend?

KAY (*sharply*): Yes.

MRS. C. (*same technique*): Isn't it a pity—you couldn't—I mean, if he's a really nice man.

KAY (*trying to cut it short*): Yes, a great pity.

MRS. C.: I've so often hoped you'd be settled with some nice man—and when the Philipsons told me——

KAY (*harshly*): Mother, I'm forty to-day. Had you forgotten?

MRS. C. (*taking it well*): Of course I hadn't. A mother *always* remembers. Joan——

JOAN (*whose attention has been elsewhere, turning*): Yes, Grannie Conway?

MRS. C. (*crossly*): Don't call me that ridiculous name.

JOAN: I forgot, I'm sorry.

MRS. C.: Didn't I tell you it was Kay's birthday? I've something for you too——

KAY: No, Mother, you mustn't—really——

MRS. C. (*producing small diamond brooch*): There! Your father gave me that, the second Christmas after we were married, and it's a charming little brooch. Brazilian diamonds. It was an old piece then. Look at the colour in the stones. You always get that in the old South American diamonds. There now!

KAY (*gently*): It's very sweet of you, Mother, but really I'd rather not take this from you.

MRS. C.: Don't be absurd. It's mine and now I give it to you. Take

it or I'll be cross. And many happy returns, of course. (KAY takes the brooch, then, suddenly rather moved, kisses her mother.) When you were younger, I never liked you as much as I did Hazel, but now I think I was wrong.

HAZEL: Oh—Mother!

MRS. C.: I know, Hazel dear, but you're such a fool with that little husband of yours. Why, if he were mine——

HAZEL (*sharply for her*): Well he isn't—and you really know very little about him.

MRS. C. (*as she looks about her*): It's time the men were here. I've always hated seeing a lot of women sitting about, with no men. They always look silly, and then I feel silly myself. I don't know why. (Notices ALAN. *With some malice.*) Of course you're here, Alan. I was forgetting you. Or forgetting you were a man.

ALAN (*mildly*): I must grow a shaggy beard and drum on my chest and ro-o-ar!

JOAN (*doing her best*): When their Uncle Frank—you know, Freda's husband, they live in London—took the children to the Zoo for the first time, little Richard was only five—and there was an enormous monkey—what Alan said reminded me of it—and——

MRS. C. (*cutting this ruthlessly*): Would anybody like a glass of port? Kay? Hazel? What about you, Madge? It's a scholarly wine. You remember what Meredith wrote about it in *The Egoist*. But nobody reads Meredith now and nobody takes port. I used to read Meredith when I was a girl and thought I was very clever. But I didn't like port then. Now I don't care about Meredith, but I rather like port. (She has poured herself a glass of port, and now tips it.) It's not good port this—even I know that, though men always say women don't know anything about it—but it's rich and warming, even this—like a handsome compliment. That's gone too. Nobody pays compliments any more—except old Doctor Halliday, who's well over eighty and has no memory at all. He talked to me for half an hour the other day, thinking I was Mrs. Rushbury—— (Ring at bell.) There! That's probably Gerald.

MADGE (*wearily*): At last!

MRS. C. (*maliciously*): Yes, Madge, but you mustn't be so impatient.

MADGE glares at her. ALAN is now ushering in GERALD THORNTON, who carries a brief-case, and ERNEST BEEVERS. GERALD is over fifty now, and though careful of his appearance, he looks it. He is grey and wears glasses. He is much drier and harder than he was in ACT I. ERNEST BEEVERS looks far more prosperous than



MADGE: And that doesn't mean you're at liberty to make yourself unpleasant.

MRS. C. (*sharply*): Be quiet, Madge. (*Turning, with smile and great social air, to GERALD.*) Now then, Gerald, we're all waiting. Tell us all about it.

GERALD, *who has been glancing at his papers, looks up at her and round the waiting circle with a sort of despair, as if to ask what could be done with such people.*

GERALD (*in dry legal tone*): Acting under instructions from Mrs. Conway, after it was decided you should all meet here, I have prepared a short statement of Mrs. Conway's present financial position——

MRS. C. (*protesting*): Gerald.

GERALD (*rather despairing*): Yes?

MRS. C.: Must you talk in that awful dry inhuman way? I mean, after all, I've known you since you were a boy, and the children have known you all their lives, and you're beginning to talk as if you'd never seen any of us before. And it sounds so horrid.

GERALD: But I'm not here now as a friend of the family, but as your solicitor.

MRS. C. (*with dignity*): No. You're here as a friend of the family who also happens to be my solicitor. And I think it would be much better if you told us all in a simple friendly way what the position is.

ALAN: I think that would be better, you know, Gerald.

KAY: So do I. When you turn on that legal manner, I can't take you seriously—I feel you're still acting in one of our old charades.

HAZEL (*with sudden warmth*): Oh—weren't they fun! And you were so good in them, Gerald. Why can't we have some more——

ERNEST (*brutally*): What—at your age?

HAZEL: I don't see why not. Mother was older than we are now when she used to play——

GERALD (*not amused by all this*): You're not proposing to turn this into a charade, are you, Hazel?

KAY: What a pity it isn't one!

ALAN (*very quietly*): Perhaps it is.

MRS. C.: Now don't *you* start being silly, Alan. Now then, Gerald, just tell us how things are—and don't read out a lot of figures and dates and things—I know you've brought them with you—but keep them for anybody who wants to have a look at them—perhaps *you'd* like to have a look at them afterwards, Ernest——

ERNEST: I might. (*To GERALD.*) Go ahead.

GERALD (*dryly*): Well, the position is this. Mrs. Conway for a long time now has derived her income from two sources. A holding in Farrow and Conway Limited. And some property in Newlingham, the houses at the north end of Church Road. Farrow and Conway were hit badly by the slump and have not recovered yet. The houses in Church Road are not worth anything like what they were, and the only chance of making that property pay is to convert the houses into flats. But this would demand a substantial outlay of capital. Mrs. Conway has received an offer for her holding in Farrow and Conway Limited, but it is a very poor offer. It would not pay for the reconstruction of the Church Road property. Meanwhile that property may soon be a liability instead of an asset. So, you see, the position is very serious.

MADGE (*coldly*): I must say I'm very much surprised. I always understood that mother was left extremely well provided for.

MRS. C. (*proudly*): Certainly I was. Your father saw to that.

GERALD: Both the shares and the property have declined in value.

MADGE: Yes, but even so—I'm still surprised. Mother must have been very extravagant.

GERALD: Mrs. Conway hasn't been as careful as she might have been.

MRS. C.: There were six of you to bring up and educate——

MADGE: It isn't that. I know how much *we* cost. It's since then that the money's been spent. And I know who must have had most of it—Robin!

MRS. C. (*angry now*): That'll do, Madge. It was my money——

MADGE: It wasn't. It was only yours to hold in trust for us. Alan, you're the eldest and you've been here all the time, why didn't you do something?

ALAN: I'm afraid—I—haven't bothered much about—these things——

MADGE (*with growing force*): Then you ought to have done. I think it's absolutely wicked. I've been working hard earning my living for over twenty years, and I've looked forward to having something from what father left, enough to pay for a few really good holidays or to buy myself a little house of my own—and now it's all gone—just because mother and Robin between them have flung it away——

MRS. C. (*angrily*): You ought to be ashamed of yourself, talking like that! What if I have helped Robin? He needed it, and I'm his mother. If you'd needed it, I'd have helped you too——

MADGE: You wouldn't. When I told you I had a chance to buy a partnership in that school, you only laughed at me——

MRS. C.: Because you were all right where you were and didn't need to buy any partnerships.

MADGE: And Robin did, I suppose?

MRS. C.: Yes, because he's a man—with a wife and children to support. This is just typical of you, Madge. Call yourself a Socialist and blame people for taking an interest in money, and then it turns out you're the most mercenary of us all.

MADGE: I don't call myself a Socialist—though that's nothing to do with it——

ERNEST (*who has been glancing at an evening paper, breaking in brutally*): How long does this go on? Because I've something else to do.

MRS. C. (*trying hard to placate him*): That's all right, Ernest. Look what you've done now, Madge. Made Joan cry.

JOAN (*suddenly weeping quietly in the background*): I'm sorry—I just—remembered—so many things—that's all——

GERALD: At the present moment, Mrs. Conway has a considerable overdraft at the bank. Now there are two possible courses of action. One is to sell the houses for what they'll fetch, and to hold on to the Farrow and Conway shares. But I warn you that the houses won't fetch much. The alternative is to sell the shares, then to raise an additional sum—probably between two or three thousand pounds—and to convert the houses into flats——

MRS. C. (*hopefully*): We've had a sort of scheme from an architect, and really it looks most attractive. There'd be at least thirty nice flats, and you know what people will pay for flats nowadays. Don't you think it's a splendid idea, Ernest? (*He does not reply. She smiles at him and then her smile falters, but she returns hopefully to the theme.*) I felt if we all discussed it in a nice friendly way, we could decide something. I know you business men like everything cut-and-dried, but I believe it's better to be nice and friendly. It isn't true that people will only do things for money. I'm always being surprised about that. People are very nice and kind, really—— (*Breaks off, then looks at the women, more intimate tone.*) Only last week, I went to old Mrs. Jepson's funeral, and I was walking back through the cemetery with Mrs. Whitehead—I hadn't been round there for years—and I saw Carol's grave—and, of course, I was rather upset, suddenly coming on it like that—but it was so beautifully kept, with flowers—lovely flowers—growing there. And I thought, now there's an instance—nobody's told them to do that or paid them for it—it's just natural kindness——

MADGE (*harshly*): No it isn't. Somebody must have been paying for it.

KAY (*turning*): Alan! It must be you. Isn't it?

ALAN: Well—I do send them something—once every year, y'know—it isn't much.

HAZEL: Oh, Mother—I'd forgotten about Carol—it's sixteen years ago.

ALAN: Seventeen.

HAZEL (*in melancholy wonder*): Why, my Margaret's nearly as big as she was. Doesn't that seem strange, Kay?

KAY: I'd nearly forgotten about Carol too.

MRS. C. (*with some emotion*): Don't think I had—because I was so stupid about that grave. I'm not one of those people who remember graves, it's human beings I remember. Only the other day, when I was sitting upstairs, I heard Carol shouting “Mo-ther, mo-ther”—you know how she used to do. And then I began thinking about her, my poor darling, and how she came in that awful day, her face quite greyish, and said, “Mother, I've the most sickening pain,” and then it was too late when they operated——

HAZEL: Yes, Mother, we remember.

ERNEST (*harsh and astonishing*): I'll tell you what you don't remember—and what some of you never even knew. She was the best of the lot—that one—little Carol—worth all the rest of you put together.

HAZEL (*a shocked wife*): Ernest!

ERNEST: Yes, and I'm counting you in. You were the one I wanted—that's all right, I got the one I wanted—but it didn't take me two hours to see that little Carol was the best of the lot. (*Adds gloomily.*) Didn't surprise me when she went off like that. Out! Finish! Too good to last.

MRS. C. (*now near to tears*): Ernest is quite right. She was the best of you all. My darling baby, I haven't forgotten you, I haven't forgotten you. (*Rising.*) Oh, why isn't Robin here? (*Begins weeping, also moves away.*) Go on, Gerald, explaining to them. I shan't be long. Don't move.

*Goes out in tears. There is silence for a moment or two.*

MADGE: Surely, under the circumstances, it's absurd that mother and Alan should continue living in this house. It's much too large for them.

ALAN (*mildly*): Yes. We could do with something much smaller now.

MADGE: Then this house could be sold, that would help. It's mother's freehold, isn't it?

GERALD: I think it would be better to move into something smaller.

just to cut down living expenses. But this house wouldn't fetch very much now.

HAZEL: Why, mother was offered thousands and thousands for it just after the War.

ERNEST (*dryly*): Yes, but this isn't just after the War. It's just before the next War.

GERALD: How much do *you* think, Ernest?

ERNEST: Take anything you can get for it.

KAY: Well, what are we supposed to do? If the worst comes to the worst, we can club together to keep mother going——

MADGE: But it's monstrous. When I was at home—and knew about things—we were considered quite well off. There were all the shares and property father left, not simply for mother but for all of us. And now not only has it nearly all been frittered away, but we're expected to provide for mother——

KAY (*rather wearily*): But if the money's gone, it's gone.

GERALD: No, the point is this——

*He is stopped by a loud ring at bell. They turn and look. ALAN moves, then stops. ROBIN has marched in. He is wearing an old raincoat. He is shabbily smart, and looks what he is, a slackish, hard-drinking unsuccessful man of forty-two.*

ROBIN: Hello! All here? Where's mother?

ALAN: She'll be back in a minute.

*ROBIN takes off his raincoat and negligently gives it to ALAN, who characteristically accepts it and puts it away. ROBIN takes no notice of this, but looks at JOAN.*

ROBIN: Well, Joan. How are the offspring?

JOAN (*stiffly*): They're quite well, Robin.

ROBIN: Still telling them what an awful man their father is?

MADGE: Are we going to have this all over again?

ROBIN: No, you're not—dear old Madge. Do I see a drink over there? I do. Have a drink, Gerald. Ernest, have a drink. No? Well, I will. (*Goes and helps himself liberally to whisky and soda. Turns after first quick drink, faces them and grins.*) Hello, Kay. Condescending to visit the provinces again, eh?

KAY: Yes, but I've got to be back sometime to-night.

ROBIN: Don't blame you. Wish I was going back to town. That's the place. I've half a mind to chuck what I'm doing and try my luck there again. Know several decent chaps there.

KAY: What are you doing now, Robin?

ROBIN (*rather gloomily*): Trying to sell a new heavy motor oil. I ought to have tried your stunt—writing. Might, one day. I could tell 'em something—my oath I could. (*Finishes his drink rather noisily.*) Well, don't let me interrupt the business. Or are you waiting for mother?

MADGE: No, we're better without her.

ROBIN (*belligerently*): Yes, you would think that! But don't forget, it's her money——

*He stops because MRS. C. reappears, all smiles.*

MRS. C. (*joyfully*): Robin! Now this is nice! (*Sweeps across and kisses him. There is perhaps a touch of defiance to the others in the warmth of her welcome.*) Are you staying the night?

ROBIN: I wasn't, but I could do—(*with a grin*) in Alan's best pyjamas.

*They settle themselves.*

MADGE: We were just saying, Mother, that it was absurd for you to keep on living here. The house is much too big and expensive now.

ROBIN: That's for mother to decide——

MRS. C.: No, that's all right, dear. It is too big now, and, of course, if I sold it I could probably raise enough to convert the Church Road houses into flats.

ERNEST: No you couldn't. Nothing like.

MRS. C. (*with dignity*): Really, Ernest! I was offered four thousand pounds for it once.

ERNEST: You ought to have taken it.

GERALD: I'm afraid you can't count on getting much for this house, though, of course, you'll save money by living in a smaller place.

ROBIN: Not much, though. She'd have to pay rent for the smaller house, and this is hers.

GERALD (*rather impatiently for him, probably because ROBIN is here*): But rates and taxes are fairly heavy on this house. I want you all to understand that the present situation is very unsatisfactory. The overdraft can be paid off, of course, simply by selling shares or some of the houses, but after that Mrs. Conway would be worse off than ever. If the money for the conversion scheme could be raised, then the Church Road property would bring in a decent income.

MRS. C.: And I'm sure that's the thing to do. Flats. I might live in one of them myself—a nice, cosy little flat. Delightful!

GERALD: But after you've sold your shares you've still to find another two or three thousand to pay for the conversion into flats.

MRS. C.: But couldn't I borrow that?

GERALD: Not from the bank. They won't accept the Church Road houses as security for a loan to convert them into flats. I've tried that.

HAZEL (*hopefully, and a shade timidly*): Ernest—could lend you the money.

ERNEST (*staggered by this*): What!

HAZEL (*rather faltering now*): Well, you could easily afford it, Ernest.

MRS. C. (*smiling*): From what I hear, you're very well off indeed these days, Ernest.

GERALD: Oh—there's no doubt about that.

MRS. C. (*hoping this will win him over*): And it only seems yesterday, Ernest, that you first came here—a very shy young man from nowhere.

ERNEST (*grimly*): It's twenty years ago, to be exact—but that's just what I was—a shy young man from nowhere. And when I managed to wangle myself into this house I thought I'd got somewhere.

MRS. C.: I remember so well feeling that about you at the time, Ernest.

ERNEST: Yes. I was made to feel I'd got somewhere, too. But I stuck it. I've always been able to stick it, when I've had my mind on something I badly wanted. That's how I've managed to get on.

ROBIN (*who doesn't like him, obviously*): Don't begin to tell us now that you landed here with only a shilling in your pocket—

MRS. C. (*warning, reproachful, yet secretly amused*): Now, now, Robin!

ERNEST (*in level unpleasant tone*): I wasn't going to. Don't worry, you're not going to have the story of *my* life. All I was about to say was—that as far as I'm concerned, you can whistle for your two or three thousand pounds. You won't get a penny from me. And I might as well tell you—while I'm making myself unpleasant—that I could lend you the two or three thousand without feeling it. Only, I'm not going to. Not a penny.

HAZEL (*indignation struggling with her fear of him*): You make me feel ashamed.

ERNEST (*staring hard at her*): Oh! Why? (*She does not reply, but begins to crumple under his hard stare.*) Go on. Tell 'em why I make you feel ashamed. Tell *me*. Or would you like to tell me later when I'm telling you a few things?

HAZEL *crumples into tears*. ROBIN *jumps up, furious*.

ROBIN: I never did like you, Beevers. I've half a mind to boot you out of this house.

ERNEST (*no coward*): You do, and I'll bring an action for assault. And I'd enjoy it. My money or the boot, eh? I told Hazel a long time ago that not one of you would ever get a penny out of me. And I'm not mean. Ask her. But I swore to myself after the very first night I came here, when you were all being so high and mighty—especially you—that you'd never see a penny that I ever made.

ROBIN (*with a lurking grin*): I see.

ERNEST (*very sharply*): What's that mean? By God, she *has*! She's been giving you money—*my* money.

HAZEL (*terribly alarmed now*): Oh—Robin, why did you?

ROBIN (*irritably*): What does it matter? He can't eat you.

ERNEST (*very quietly and deadly, to HAZEL*): Come on.

*Goes out. HAZEL looks terrified.*

MADGE: Don't go, if you don't want to.

KAY: Hazel, there's nothing to be afraid of.

HAZEL (*sincere, quiet, desperate*): There is. I'm frightened of *him*. Except right at the first—I've always been frightened of him.

ROBIN (*noisily*): Don't be silly. This little pipsqueak! What can *he* do?

HAZEL: I don't know. It isn't that. It's just something about him.

ERNEST (*returning with his overcoat on, to HAZEL*): Come on. I'm going.

HAZEL (*summoning up all her courage*): N-no.

*He waits and looks at her. She slowly moves towards him, fearful and ashamed. MRS. C. moves hastily over towards ERNEST.*

MRS. C. (*excitedly*): You sneaked your way in here, Ernest Beevers, and somehow you persuaded or bullied Hazel, who was considered then one of the prettiest girls in Newlingham, into marrying you——

HAZEL (*imploring her*): No, Mother—please don't——

MRS. C.: I'll tell him now what I've always wanted to tell him. (*Approaching ERNEST with vehemence.*) I was a fool. My husband wouldn't have had such a bullying mean little rat near the house. I never liked you. And I'm not surprised to hear you say you've always hated us. Don't ever come here again, don't ever let me see you again. I only wish I was Hazel for just one day, I'd show you something. What—you—my daughter——! (*In a sudden fury she slaps him hard across the face, with a certain grand magnificence of manner.*) Now bring an action for that!

*Stands there, blazing at him. He rubs his cheek a little, backs a step or two, looking at her steadily.*

ERNEST (*quietly*): You've done a lot of dam' silly things in your time, Mrs. Conway, but you'll find that's the dam' silliest. (*Turns and walks to door. At door he turns quickly to HAZEL.*) Come on.

*Goes out. HAZEL is wretched.*

HAZEL: Oh—Mother—you shouldn't.

ROBIN (*rather grandly*): She did quite right. And you just let me know—if he gives you any trouble.

HAZEL (*tearfully, shaking her head as she wanders towards door*): No, Robin. You don't understand . . . you don't understand. . . .

*She goes out slowly. A strained silence. MRS. C. goes back to her place.*

MRS. C. (*with a short laugh*): Well—I suppose that was a silly thing to do.

GERALD (*gravely*): I'm afraid it was, y'know.

KAY: You see, it's Hazel who will have to pay for it.

ROBIN: Well, she needn't. She's only to let me know what he's up to.

JOAN (*surprisingly*): What's the good of talking like that? What could you do? He can make her life a misery, and you couldn't stop it.

MADGE: Well, it's her own fault. I've no patience with her. I wouldn't stand it ten minutes.

JOAN (*with plenty of spirit, for her*): It's no use you talking, Madge. You simply don't understand. You've never been married.

MADGE: No, and after what I've seen here, I think I'm lucky.

MRS. C. (*with energy*): You're not lucky—never were and never will be—and as you haven't the least idea what a woman's real life is like, the less you say the better. You're not among schoolgirls and silly teachers now. Robin, give me a glass of port. Won't you have a drink too?

ROBIN *pours her a port and himself another whisky.*

GERALD (*rising. He has already put his papers away in case*): I don't think there's any point in my staying any longer.

MRS. C.: But we haven't settled anything.

GERALD (*rather coldly*): I thought there was a chance that Ernest Beevers might have been persuaded to lend you the money. As I don't think anybody else here has three thousand pounds to spare—

ROBIN (*turning on him*): All right, Thornton, you needn't be so damned supercilious about it. Seems to me you've not made a particularly bright job of handling my mother's affairs.

GERALD (*annoyed*): I don't think that comes too well from you.

For years I've given good advice, and never once has it been acted upon. Now I'd be only too delighted to hand over these affairs.

ROBIN: I believe I could make a better job of it myself.

GERALD (*stiffly*): I can't imagine a possible worse choice. (*Moves with his case.*) Good night, Kay. Good night, Alan.

JOAN (*moving*): I think I'll come along too, Gerald.

GERALD and ALAN go out.

ROBIN: You'll be able to have a nice little chat about me on the way.

JOAN stands still now and looks across at him.

JOAN (*very quietly*): It doesn't hurt so much as it used to do, Robin, when you say such bitter things. I suppose one day it won't hurt at all.

ROBIN (*who is sorry at the moment*): Sorry, old girl. And give my love to the kids. Say I'm coming to see them soon.

JOAN: Yes, come and see us soon. Only remember—we're very poor now.

ROBIN: Thanks for that. And then you talk about being bitter.

*They look at one another for a moment, lost and hopeless. Then JOAN moves away, slowly.*

KAY (*rather painfully*): Good night, my dear.

JOAN (*painfully turning and producing little social smile*): Good night, Kay. It's been nice—seeing you again.

*She goes out. KAY, who is moved, withdraws herself.*

ROBIN (*after another drink, an optimist*): Well, now we ought to be able to settle something.

MADGE (*coldly*): So far as I'm concerned, this has simply been a waste of time—and nervous energy.

MRS. C. (*with malice*): You know, Madge, when I think of Gerald Thornton as he is now, a dreary, conceited middle-aged bachelor, I can't help thinking it's perhaps a pity you *didn't* marry him.

ROBIN (*with a guffaw*): What, Madge! I never knew you fancied Gerald Thornton.

MRS. C. (*in light but significant tone*): She did—once. Didn't you, dear? And I believe he was interested—oh, a long time ago, when you children were all still at home.

KAY (*sharply*): Mother, if that's not true, then it's stupid silly talk. If it is true, then it's cruel.

MRS. C.: Nonsense! And not so high-and-mighty, please, Kay.

MADGE (*facing them bravely*): It was true, a long time ago, just after the War. When I still thought we could suddenly make everything better for everybody. Socialism! Peace! Universal Brotherhood!

All that. And I felt then that Gerald Thornton and I together could—help. He had a lot of fine qualities, I thought—I believe he had then, too—and only needed to be pulled out of his rut here, to have his enthusiasm aroused. I was remembering to-night—when I was looking at him. It came back to me quite quickly. (*This last was more to KAY than the other two. Now she takes her mother in.*) One evening—just one evening—and something you did that evening—ruined it all. I'd almost forgotten—but seeing us all here again to-night reminded me—I believe it was at a sort of party for you, Kay. (*Accusingly to her mother.*) Do you remember?

MRS. C.: Really, Madge, you *are* absurd. I seem to remember some piece of nonsense, when we were all being foolish.

MADGE: Yes, you remember. It was quite deliberate on your part. Just to keep a useful young man unattached or jealousy of a girl's possible happiness, or just out of sheer nasty female mischief. . . . And something went for ever. . . .

MRS. C.: It can't have been worth very much then.

MADGE: A seed is easily destroyed, but it might have grown into an oak tree. (*Pauses, looks solemnly at her mother.*) I'm glad I'm not a mother.

MRS. C. (*annoyed*): Yes, you may well say that.

MADGE (*with deadly deliberation*): I know how I'd have despised myself if I'd turned out to be a bad mother.

MRS. C. (*angrily, rising*): So that's what you call me? (*Pauses, then with more vehemence and emotion.*) Just because you never think of anybody but yourselves. All selfish—selfish. Because everything hasn't happened as you wanted it, turn on me—all my fault. You never really think about me. Don't try to see things for a moment from my point of view. When you were children, I was so proud of you all, so confident that you would grow up to be wonderful creatures. I used to see myself at the age I am now, surrounded by you and your own children, so proud of you, so happy with you all, this house happier and gayer even than it was in the best of the old days. And now my life's gone by, and what's happened? You're a resentful soured schoolmistress, middle-aged before your time. Hazel—the loveliest child there ever was—married to a vulgar little bully, and terrified of him. Kay here—gone away to lead her own life, and very bitter and secretive about it, as if she'd failed. Carol—the happiest and kindest of you all—dead before she's twenty. Robin—I know, my dear, I'm not blaming you now, but I must speak the truth for once—with a wife he can't love and no sort of position or comfort or anything. And Alan—the eldest, the boy his father adored, that he thought might do anything—what's he now? (*ALAN has come in now*

*and is standing there quietly listening.*) A miserable clerk with no prospects, no ambition, no self-respect, a shabby little man that nobody would look at twice. *(She sees him standing there now, but in her worked-up fury does not care, and lashes out at him.)* Yes, a shabby clerk that nobody would look at twice.

KAY *(in a sudden fury of loyalty)*: How dare you, Mother, how dare you! Alan of all people!

ALAN *(with a smile)*: That's all right, Kay. Don't you get excited. It's not a bad description. I am a shabby little clerk, y'know. It must be very disappointing.

MRS. C.: Oh—don't be so forgiving! Robin, you've always been selfish and weak and a bit of a good-for-nothing——

ROBIN: Here, steady, old girl. I've had some rotten bad luck, too, y'know, and a lot of it's just luck. I've come to see that.

MRS. C. *(exhausted now)*: All right—add the bad luck, too, my dear. The point is, whatever they may say about you, Robin my darling, you're my own boy and my own sort, and a great comfort. So you and I will go upstairs and talk.

ROBIN *(as she takes his arm)*: That's the spirit!

*They move off together.*

MADGE *(very quietly)*: Mother! *(MRS. C. stops but does not turn.)* We've both said what we want to say. There isn't any more to be said. And if you decide to have any more of these family conferences, don't trouble to ask me to attend them, because I shan't. I don't expect now to see a penny of father's money. And please don't expect to see any of mine.

ROBIN: Who wants yours?

MRS. C.: Come on, my dear, and we'll talk like human beings.

*They go out. The other three are quiet and still.*

MADGE: I have an idea I wasn't too pleasant to you, Kay, earlier when we met to-night. If so, I'm sorry.

KAY: That's all right, Madge. Are you going back to Collingfield to-night?

MADGE: No, I can't. But I'm staying with Nora Fleming—you remember her? She's Head of Newlingham High now. I've left my things there. I'll go now. I don't want to see mother again.

KAY: Good-bye, Madge. I hope you collar one of these headships.

MADGE: Good-bye, Kay. And do try and write a good book, instead of doing nothing but this useless journalism.

*They kiss. MADGE goes off, accompanied by ALAN. KAY, left to herself, shows that she is deeply moved. She moves restlessly, then*

*hastily pours herself a whisky and soda, lights a cigarette, tastes the whisky, then sits down, ignores the cigarette burning in her hand and the whisky, stares into the past, and then begins to cry. ALAN returns, filling his pipe.*

ALAN (*cheerfully*): You've a good half-hour yet, Kay, before you need set out for the London train. I'll take you to the station. (*Comes up to her.*) What's the matter? Has all this—been a bit too much for you?

KAY (*ruefully*): Apparently. And I thought I was tough now, Alan. . . . See, I was doing the modern working woman—a cigarette and a whisky and soda . . . no good, though. . . . You see, Alan, I've not only been here to-night, I've been here remembering other nights, long ago, when we weren't like this. . . .

ALAN: Yes, I know. Those old Christmasses. . . . birthday parties. . . .

KAY: Yes, I remembered. I saw all of us then. Myself, too. Oh, silly girl of Nineteen Ninteen! Oh, lucky girl!

ALAN: You mustn't mind too much. It's all right, y'know. Like being forty?

KAY: Oh no, Alan, it's hideous and unbearable. Remember what we once were and what we thought we'd be. And now this. And it's all we have, Alan, it's *us*. Every step we've taken—every tick of the clock—making everything worse. If this is all life is, what's the use? Better to die, like Carol, before you find it out, before Time gets to work on you. I've felt it before, Alan, but never as I've done to-night. There's a great devil in the universe, and we call it Time.

ALAN (*playing with his pipe, quietly, shyly*): Did you ever read Blake?

KAY: Yes.

ALAN: Do you remember this? (*quotes quietly, but with feeling*):

Joy and woe are woven fine,  
A clothing for the soul divine;  
Under every grief and pine  
Runs a joy with silken twine.  
It is right it should be so;  
Man was made for joy and woe;  
And when this we rightly know,  
Safely through the world we go. . . .

KAY: Safely through the world we go? No, it isn't true, Alan—or it isn't true for me. If things were merely mixed—good and bad—that would be all right, but they get worse. We've seen it to-night. Time's beating us.

ALAN: No, Time's only a kind of dream, Kay. If it wasn't, it would have to destroy everything—the whole universe—and then remake it again every tenth of a second. But Time doesn't destroy anything. It merely moves us on—in this life—from one peep-hole to the next.

KAY: But the happy young Conways, who used to play charades here, they've gone, and gone for ever.

ALAN: No, they're real and existing, just as we two, here now, are real and existing. We're seeing another bit of the view—a bad bit, if you like—but the whole landscape's still there.

KAY: But, Alan, we can't be anything but what we are *now*.

ALAN: No . . . it's hard to explain . . . suddenly like this . . . there's a book I'll lend you—read it in the train. But the point is, now, at this moment, or any moment, we're only a cross-section of our real selves. What we *really* are is the whole stretch of ourselves, all our time, and when we come to the end of this life, all those selves, all our time, will be *us*—the real you, the real me. And then perhaps we'll find ourselves in another time, which is only another kind of dream.

KAY: I'll try to understand . . . so long as you really believe—and think it's possible for me to believe—that Time's not ticking our lives away . . . wrecking . . . and ruining everything . . . for ever. . . .

ALAN: No, it's all right, Kay. I'll get you that book. (*Moves away towards door, then turns.*) You know, I believe half our trouble now is because we think Time's ticking our lives away. That's why we snatch and grab and hurt each other.

KAY: As if we were all in a panic on a sinking ship.

ALAN: Yes, like that.

KAY (*smiling at him*): But you don't do those things—bless you!

ALAN: I think it's easier not to—if you take a long view.

KAY: As if we're—immortal beings?

ALAN (*smiling*): Yes, and in for a tremendous adventure.

*Goes out. KAY, comforted, but still brooding, goes to the window and stands there looking out, with head raised. No sooner is she settled there than the curtain comes down.*

END OF ACT TWO

### ACT III

KAY *is sitting just as we left her at the end of ACT I, and we can still hear MRS. CONWAY singing Schumann's "Der Nussbaum". Nothing happens until the song has ended and we have heard some applause and voices from the party, but then ALAN enters and switches on the lights. We see that the room and everything in it is exactly as they were before. Only KAY herself has changed. Something—elusive, a brief vision, a score of shadowy presentiments—is haunting her. She is deeply disturbed. She throws a look or two at the room, as if she had just seen it in some other guise. She looks at ALAN, puzzled. He grins and rubs his hands a little.*

ALAN: Well, Kay?

KAY (*as if to break into something important*): Alan—— (*Breaks off.*)

ALAN: Yes?

KAY (*hurriedly*): No—nothing.

ALAN (*looking more closely at her*): I believe you've been asleep—while mother was singing.

KAY (*confusedly*): No. I was sitting here—listening. I turned the light out. No, I didn't fall asleep—I don't know, perhaps I did—just for a second. It couldn't have been longer.

ALAN: You'd know if you'd been asleep.

KAY (*looking about her, slowly*): No, I wasn't asleep. But—quite suddenly—I thought I saw . . . we were. . . . Anyhow, you came into it, I think, Alan.

ALAN (*amused and puzzled*): Came into *what*?

KAY: I can't remember. And I know I was listening to mother singing all the time. I'm—a bit—wuzzy.

ALAN: Most of the people are going now. You'd better go and say good night.

HAZEL *enters, carrying plate on which is enormous piece of sticky, rich, creamy cake. She has already begun to tackle this as she moves in.*

KAY (*seeing her*): Hazel, you greedy pig!

KAY *deftly swoops up a bit of the cake and eats it.*

HAZEL (*talking with her mouth rather full*): I didn't come in here just to eat this.

KAY: Course you did!

HAZEL: They're all saying good night now, and I'm dodging that little horror Gerald Thornton brought.

KAY (*hastily*): I must say my piece to them.

*Hurries off. ALAN lingers.*

ALAN (*after a pause*): Hazel!

HAZEL (*mouth full*): Um?

ALAN (*with elaborate air of casualness*): What's Joan Helford going to do now?

HAZEL: Oh—just mooch round a bit.

ALAN: I thought I heard her saying she was going away—I was wondering if she was leaving Newlingham.

HAZEL: She's only going to stay with her aunt. Joan's always staying with aunts. Why can't we have aunts planted all over the place?

ALAN: There's Aunt Edith

HAZEL: And a doctor's house in Wolverhampton! Ghastly! (*Quick change of tone. Teasingly.*) Anything else you'd like to know about Joan?

ALAN (*confused*): No—no. I—just wondered. (*Turns to go and almost bumps into ERNEST, who is wearing a very shabby mackintosh-raincoat and carrying a bowler hat. As soon as HAZEL sees who it is, she turns away and has another dab at her cake. ALAN stops and so does ERNEST.*) Oh! you going?

ERNEST (*a man who knows his own mind*): In a minute. (*He obviously waits for ALAN to clear out.*)

ALAN (*rather confused*): Yes—well— (Makes a move.)

HAZEL (*kindly and clearly*): Alan, you're not going?

*She looks across, completely ignoring ERNEST, who waits, not perhaps quite as cool as he would appear on the surface, for the hat he is clutching moves a bit.*

ALAN (*not at home in this*): Yes—have to say good night and get their coats and things—you know—

*Goes out. HAZEL attends to her cake, and then looks, without a smile, at ERNEST.*

ERNEST: I just looked in to say good night, Miss Conway—

HAZEL (*blankly*): Oh—yes—of course. Well—

ERNEST (*cutting in*): It's been a great pleasure to me to come here and meet you all.

*He waits a moment. She finds herself compelled to speak.*

HAZEL (*same tone*): Oh—well——

ERNEST (*cutting in again*): Especially you. I'm new round here, y'know. I've only been in the place about three months. I bought a share in that paper mill—Eckersley's—out at West Newlingham—you know it?

HAZEL (*no encouragement from her*): No.

ERNEST: Thought you might have noticed it. Been there long enough. Matter of fact it wants rebuilding. But that's where I am. And I hadn't been here a week before I noticed you, Miss Conway.

HAZEL (*who knows it only too well*): Did you?

ERNEST: Yes. And I've been watching out for you ever since. I expect you've noticed me knocking about.

HAZEL (*loftily*): No, I don't think I have.

ERNEST: Oh—yes—you must have done. Come on now. Admit it.

HAZEL (*her natural self coming out now*): Well, if you must know, I have noticed you——

ERNEST (*pleased*): I thought so.

HAZEL (*rapidly and indignantly*): Because I thought you behaved very stupidly and rudely. If you want to look silly yourself—that's your affair—but you'd no right to make me look silly too——

ERNEST (*rather crushed*): Oh! I didn't know—it'd been as bad as that——

HAZEL (*feeling she has the upper hand*): Well, it has.

*He stares at her, perhaps having moved a little closer. She does not look at him at first, but then is compelled to meet his hard stare. There is something about this look that penetrates to the essential weakness of her character.*

ERNEST (*coming up again now*): I'm sorry. Though I can't see anybody's much the worse for it. After all, we've only one life to live, let's get on with it, I say. And in my opinion, you're the best-looking girl in this town, Miss Hazel Conway. I've been telling you that—in my mind—for the last two months. But I knew it wouldn't be long before I got to know you. To tell you properly. (*Looks hard at her. She does not like him but is completely helpless before this direct attack. He nods slowly.*) I expect you're thinking I'm not much of a chap. But there's a bit more in me than meets the eye. A few people have found that out already, and a lot more'll find it out before so long—here in Newlingham. You'll see. (*Changes his tone, because he is uncertain on purely social matters, almost humble now.*) Would it be all right—if I—sort of—called to see you—some time soon?

HAZEL (*coming to the top again*): You'd better ask my mother.

ERNEST (*jocularly*): Oh!—sort of *Ask Mamma* business, eh?

HAZEL (*confused and annoyed*): No—I didn't mean it like that at all. I meant that this is mother's house——

ERNEST: Yes, but you're old enough now to have your own friends, aren't you?

HAZEL: I don't make friends with people very quickly.

ERNEST (*with appalling bluntness*): Oh! I'd heard you did.

HAZEL (*haughtily, angrily*): Do you mean to say you've been discussing me with people?

ERNEST: Yes. Why not?

*They stare at one another, ERNEST coolly and deliberately and HAZEL with attempted hauteur, when MADGE and ROBIN enter together, in the middle of a talk.*

ROBIN (*who is in great form*): Golly yes! It was a great lark. We weren't in uniform, y'know. I did some stoking. Hard work, but a great stunt.

MADGE (*hotly*): It wasn't. You ought to have been ashamed of yourselves.

ROBIN (*surprised*): Why?

MADGE: Because helping to break a strike and being a blackleg isn't a lark and a stunt. Those railwaymen were desperately anxious to improve their conditions. They didn't go on strike for fun. It was a very serious thing for them and for their wives and families. And then people like you, Robin, think it's amusing when you try to do their work and make the strike useless. I think it's shameful the way the middle classes turn against the working class.

ROBIN (*rather out of his depth now*): But there had to be some sort of train service.

MADGE: Why? If the public had to do without trains altogether, they might realise then that the railwaymen have some grievances.

ERNEST (*sardonically*): They might. But I've an idea they'd be too busy with their own grievance—no trains. And you only want a few more railway strikes and then half their traffic will be gone for ever, turned into road transport. And what do your clever railwaymen do then? (*Pauses. MADGE is listening, of course, but not quite acknowledging that he had any right to join in.*) And another thing. The working class is out for itself. Then why shouldn't the middle class be out for itself?

MADGE (*coldly*): Because the middle class must have already been "out for itself"—as you call it——

ERNEST: Well, what do you call it? Something in Latin?

MADGE (*with chill impatience*): I say, the middle class must have already been successfully out for itself or it wouldn't be a comfortable middle class. Then why turn against the working class when at last *it* tries to look after itself?

ERNEST (*cynically*): That's easy. There's only so much to go round, and if you take more, then I get less.

MADGE (*rather sharply*): I'm sorry, but that's bad economics as well as bad ethics.

ROBIN (*bursting out*): But we'd have Red Revolution—like Russia—if we began to listen to these wild chaps like this J. H. Thomas.

HAZEL (*moving*): Well, I think it's all silly. Why can't people agree?

ERNEST (*seeing her going*): Oh!—Miss Conway—

HAZEL (*her very blank sweetness a snub*): Oh—yes—good night.

*She goes out. ERNEST looks after her, a rather miserable figure. Then he looks towards ROBIN just in time to catch a grin on his face before it is almost—but not quite—wiped off.*

MADGE (*to ROBIN*): I came in here for something. What was it?

*Looks about her and through ERNEST, whom she obviously dislikes.*

ROBIN (*still a grin lurking*): Don't ask me.

*MADGE goes, ignoring ERNEST, though rather absently than pointedly. ROBIN still looking vaguely mocking, lights a cigarette.*

ROBIN (*casually*): Were you in the army?

ERNEST: Yes. Two years.

ROBIN: What crush?

ERNEST: Army Pay Corps.

ROBIN (*easily, not too rudely*): That must have been fun for you.

*ERNEST looks as if he is going to make an angry retort when CAROL hurries in.*

CAROL: Mr. Beevers— (*As he turns, looking rather sullen, ROBIN wanders out.*) Oh!—you look *Put Out*.

ERNEST (*grimly*): That's about it. Put out!

CAROL (*looking hard at him*): I believe you're all hot and angry inside, aren't you?

ERNEST (*taking it as lightly as he can*): Or disappointed. Which is it?

CAROL: A mixture, I expect. Well, Mr. Beevers, you mustn't. You were very nice about the charade—and very good in it too—and I don't suppose you've ever played before, have you?

ERNEST: No. (*Grimly.*) They didn't go in for those sort of things in my family.

CAROL (*looking at him critically*): No, I don't think you've had enough Fun. That's your trouble, Mr. Beevers. You must come and play charades again.

ERNEST (*as if setting her apart from the others*): You're all right, y'know.

MRS. C.'s voice, very clear, is heard off saying, "*But surely he's gone, hasn't he?*"

CAROL: We're all all right, you know. And don't forget that, Mr. Beevers.

ERNEST (*liking her*): You're a funny kid.

CAROL (*severely*): I'm not very funny and I'm certainly not a kid——

ERNEST: Oh—sorry!

CAROL (*serenely*): I'll forgive you this time.

MRS. C. enters with GERALD. She looks rather surprised to see ERNEST still there. He notices this.

ERNEST (*awkwardly*): I'm just going, Mrs. Conway. (*To GERALD.*) You coming along?

MRS. C. (*smoothly, but quickly in*): No, Mr. Thornton and I want to talk business for a few minutes.

ERNEST: I see. Well, good night, Mrs. Conway. And I'm very pleased to have met you.

MRS. C. (*condescendingly gracious*): Good night, Mr. Beevers. Carol, will you——

CAROL (*cheerfully*): Yes. (*To ERNEST, who looks rather bewildered by it, in imitation Western American accent.*) I'll set you and your hoss on the big trail, pardner.

*She and ERNEST go out. MRS. C. and GERALD watch them go. Then GERALD turns and raises his eyebrows at her. MRS. C. shakes her head. We hear a door slammed to.*

MRS. C. (*briskly*): I'm sorry if your little friend thought he was being pushed out, but really, Gerald, the children would never have forgiven me if I'd encouraged him to stay any longer.

GERALD: I'm afraid Beevers hasn't been a success.

MRS. C.: Well, after all, he is—rather—isn't he?

GERALD: I did warn you, y'know. And really he was so desperately keen to meet the famous Conways.

MRS. C.: Hazel, you mean.

GERALD: Hazel, especially, but he was determined to know the whole family.

MRS. C.: Well, I do think they're an attractive lot of children.

GERALD: Only outshone by their attractive mother.

MRS. C. (*delighted*): Gerald! I believe you're going to flirt with me.

GERALD (*who isn't*): Of course I am. By the way, there *wasn't* any business you wanted to discuss, was there?

MRS. C.: No, not really. But I think you ought to know I've had another *enormous* offer for this house. Of course I wouldn't dream of selling it, but it's nice to know it's worth so much. Oh!—and young George Farrow would like me to sell him my share in the firm, and says he's ready to make an offer that would surprise me.

GERALD: I believe it would be pretty handsome too. But, of course, there's no point in selling out when they're paying fifteen per cent. And once we're really out of this war-time atmosphere and the government restrictions are off, there's going to be a tremendous boom.

MRS. C.: Isn't that lovely? All the children back home, and plenty of money to help them to settle down. And, mind you, Gerald, I shouldn't be a bit surprised if Robin doesn't do awfully well in some business quite soon. *Selling* things, probably—people find him so attractive. Dear Robin! (*Pauses. Then change of tone, more depth and feeling.*) Gerald, it isn't so very long ago that I thought myself the unluckiest woman in the world. If it hadn't been for the children, I wouldn't have wanted to go on living. Sometimes—without *him*—I didn't want to go on living. And now—though, of course, it'll never be the same without *him*—I suddenly feel I'm one of the luckiest women in the world. All my children round me, quite safe at last, very happy. (ROBIN'S *voice, shouting, off*, "It's hide and seek all over the house.") Did he say "all over the house"?

GERALD: Yes.

MRS. C. (*calling*): Not in my room, Robin, please.

ROBIN (*off, shouting*): Mother's room's barred.

JOAN'S VOICE (*further off, shouting*): Who's going to be It?

ROBIN'S VOICE (*off*): I am. Mother, come on. Where's Gerald?

MRS. C. (*as she prepares to move*): Just to hear him shouting about the house again—you don't know what it means to me, Gerald. And you never will know.

*They go out. As MRS. C. passes switch, she can switch off half the lights in the room, perhaps leaving right half unilluminated and perhaps standard lamp on left half.*

ROBIN'S VOICE (*loud, off*): I'll go into the coat cupboard and count fifty. Now then—scatter.

*After a moment JOAN enters, happy and breathless, and after looking about chooses a hiding-place to the right—behind a chair, end of bookcase or sofa, or curtain. No sooner has she installed herself than ALAN enters and moves across to that end. She peeps out and sees him.*

JOAN (*imploring whisper*): Oh—Alan—don't hide in here.

ALAN (*humbly*): I came specially. I saw you come in.

JOAN: No, please. Go somewhere else.

ALAN (*wistfully*): You look so pretty, Joan.

JOAN: Do I? That's sweet of you, Alan.

ALAN: Can I stay, then?

JOAN: No, please. It's so much more fun if you go somewhere else. Alan, don't spoil it.

ALAN: Spoil what?

JOAN (*very hurriedly*): The game—of course. Go on, Alan, there's a pet. Oh—you can't go out that way now. You'll have to go out of the window and then round. Go on.

ALAN: All right. (*Climbs out of window, then looks closely at her a moment, then softly.*) Good-bye, Joan.

JOAN (*whispering, surprised*): Why do you say that?

ALAN (*very sadly*): Because I feel it is good-bye.

ROBIN'S voice, humming, is heard off. ALAN goes through the curtains at the window. ROBIN, half humming, half singing, a popular song of the period, enters slowly. He moves to the edge of the lighted half, looking about him, still singing. Finally he turns away and begins to move, when JOAN joins in the song softly from her hiding-place.

ROBIN (*with satisfaction*): A-ha! (*Very quickly he closes the curtains, but as he turns his back, JOAN reaches out and turns off the switch of the standard lamp in her corner. The room is now almost in darkness.*) All right, Joan Helford. Where are you, Joan Helford, where are you? (*She is heard to laugh in the darkness.*) You can't escape, Joan Helford, you can't escape. No, no. No, no. No escape for little Joan. No escape.

*They run round the room, then she goes to the window and stands on the seat. He pulls her down, and then, in silhouette against the moonlight we see them embrace and kiss.*

JOAN (*really moved*): Oh—Robin!

ROBIN (*mocking, but nicely*): Oh—Joan!

JOAN (*shyly*): I suppose—you've been—doing this—to dozens of girls?

ROBIN (*still light*): Yes, Joan, dozens.

JOAN (*looking up at him*): I thought so.

ROBIN (*a trifle unsteadily*): Like that, Joan. But not—like this——

*Now he kisses her with more ardour.*

JOAN (*deeply moved, but still shy*): Robin—you *are* sweet.

ROBIN (*after pause*): You know, Joan, although it's not so very long since I saw you last, I couldn't believe my eyes to-night—you looked so stunning.

JOAN: It was because I'd just heard that you'd come back, Robin.

ROBIN (*who does*): I don't believe it.

JOAN (*sincerely*): Yes, it's true—honestly—I don't suppose you've ever thought about me, have you?

ROBIN (*who hasn't*): Yes, I have. Hundreds of times.

JOAN: I have about you too.

ROBIN (*kissing her*): Joan, you're a darling!

JOAN (*after pause, whispering*): Do you remember that morning you went away so early—a year ago?

ROBIN: Yes. But you weren't there. Only mother and Hazel and Kay.

JOAN: I was there too, but I didn't let any of you see me.

ROBIN (*genuinely surprised*): You got up at that filthy hour just to see me go?

JOAN (*simply*): Yes, of course. Oh—it was awful—trying to hide and trying not to cry, all at the same time.

ROBIN (*still surprised and moved*): But Joan, I'd no idea.

JOAN (*very shyly*): I didn't mean to give myself away.

ROBIN (*embracing her*): But Joan—oh gosh!—it's marvellous.

JOAN: You don't love me?

ROBIN (*now sure he does*): Of course I do. Golly, this is great! Joan, we'll have a scrumptious time!

JOAN (*solemnly*): Yes, let's. But Robin—it's terribly *serious*, y'know.

ROBIN: Oh—yes—don't think I don't feel that, too. But that's no reason why we shouldn't enjoy ourselves, is it?

JOAN (*crying out*): No, no, no. Let's be happy for ever and ever.

*They embrace fervently, silhouetted against the moonlit window. Now the curtains are suddenly drawn by CAROL, who sees them and calls out to people behind her.*

CAROL (*with a sort of cheerful disgust*): I thought so! They're in here—*Courting!* I knew there was a catch in this hide-and-seek.

ROBIN and JOAN spring apart but still hold hands as CAROL switches on all the lights and comes into the room, followed by MADGE and GERALD. MADGE is rather excited—and rather untidy, too, as if she had been hiding in some difficult place.

ROBIN (*grinning*): Sorry! Shall we start again?

MADGE (*crossing towards window*): No, thank you, Robin.

CAROL: You'd better explain to mother. I'm going to make tea.

*She goes. ROBIN and JOAN look at one another, then go out. GERALD watches MADGE, who now draws the curtains and then returns to him.*

GERALD: Well, Madge, it sounds all right. And I know Lord Robert Cecil's a fine chap. But I don't quite see where I come into it.

MADGE: Because in a few weeks' time there'll be a branch of this League of Nations Union here in Newlingham. It's no use my doing much about it—though I'll join, of course—because I'll be away. But you could be organising secretary or something, Gerald.

GERALD: Don't know that I'd be much good.

MADGE: You'd be perfect. You understand business. You know how to handle people. You'd make a good public speaker. Oh, Gerald—you're maddening!

GERALD (*smiling, not without affection*): Why, Madge? What have I done now?

MADGE: We're friends, aren't we?

GERALD: I consider you one of my very best friends, Madge, and I hope I'm not flattering myself.

MADGE (*warmly*): Of course not.

GERALD (*smiling*): Good! So?

MADGE: You're not doing enough, Gerald.

GERALD (*mildly*): I'm kept pretty busy, y'know.

MADGE: Yes, I don't mean you're lazy—though I'm not sure that you aren't a bit, y'know, Gerald—I mean you're not doing enough with yourself. You're not *using* yourself to the utmost. I could be *tremendously* proud of you, Gerald.

GERALD: That's—almost overwhelming—coming from you, Madge.

MADGE: Why from me?

GERALD: Because I know very well that you've got a very good brain and are a most critical young woman. Rather frightening.

MADGE (*rather more feminine here*): Nonsense! You don't mean that. I'd much rather you didn't, y'know.

GERALD: All right, I don't. As a matter of fact, I'm very fond of you, Madge, but don't often get a chance of showing you that I am.

MADGE (*lighting up at this*): I've always been fond of you, Gerald, and that's why I say I could be tremendously proud of you. (*With more breadth and sweep and real warm enthusiasm.*) We're going to build up a new world now. This horrible War was probably necessary because it was a great bonfire on which we threw all the old nasty rubbish of the world. Civilisation can really begin—at last. People have learned their lesson——

GERALD (*dubiously*): I hope so.

MADGE: Oh—Gerald—don't be so pessimistic, so cynical——

GERALD: Sorry, but a lawyer—even a young one—sees a lot of human nature in his office. There's a procession of people with their quarrels and grievances. And sometimes I wonder how much people are capable of learning.

MADGE: That's because you have to deal with some of the stupidest. But *the* people—all over the world—have learned their lesson. You'll see. No more piling up armaments. No more wars. No more hate and intolerance and violence. Oh—Gerald—I believe that when we look back—in twenty years time—we'll be staggered at the progress that's been made. Because things happen quickly now——

GERALD: That's true enough.

MADGE (*begins to orate a little, sincerely*): And so is all the rest. Under the League, we'll build up a new commonwealth of all the nations, so that they can live at peace for ever. And Imperialism will go. And so in the end, of course, will Capitalism. There'll be no more booms and slumps and panics and strikes and lock-outs, because the people themselves, led by the best brains in their countries, will possess both the political and economic power. There'll be Socialism at last, a free, prosperous, happy people, all enjoying equal opportunities, living at peace with the whole world. (*Quotes with great fervour and sincerity.*)

Bring me my bow of burning gold:  
Bring me my Arrows of desire:  
Bring me my Spear: O clouds unfold!  
Bring me my Chariot of fire.

I will not cease from Mental Fight,  
Nor shall my Sword sleep in my hand  
Till we have built Jerusalem  
In England's green and pleasant Land . . .

GERALD (*genuinely moved by her fervour*): Madge—you're inspired to-night. I—I hardly recognise you—you're——

MADGE (*warmly, happily*): This is the real me. Oh!—Gerald—in this New World we're going to build up now, men and women won't play a silly little game of cross-purposes any longer. They'll go forward together—sharing everything——

MRS. C. *enters with HAZEL. MADGE breaks off, looking rather untidy. GERALD, who has been genuinely dominated by her, looks round, recovering himself.*

MRS. C. (*with maddening maternal briskness*): Madge dear, your hair's all over the place, you've made your nose all shiny, you're horribly untidy, and I'm sure you're in the middle of a Socialist speech that must be boring poor Gerald.

*The generous mood is shattered. MADGE might have been hit in the face. She looks at her mother, then looks quickly at GERALD, reads something in his face—a sort of withdrawal from her—that is somehow final, and then in complete silence walks straight out of the room.*

MRS. C. (*lightly, but knowing what has happened*): Poor Madge!

HAZEL (*with sudden reproach*): Mother!

MRS. C. (*with wide innocence*): What, Hazel?

HAZEL (*significantly, indicating GERALD*): You know!

GERALD (*not half the man he was*): I think—I'd better be going.

MRS. C.: Oh—no, Gerald, don't go. Kay and Carol are making some tea and we're all going to be nice and cosy together in here.

GERALD: I fancy it's rather late, though. (*Glances at his watch, while HAZEL slips out.*) After eleven. I must go. I've an early appointment in the morning, and one or two things to look through before I turn in to-night. So—— (*With slight smile. KAY enters with folding legs of small Oriental table. She puts them down, to turn to GERALD, and MRS. CONWAY arranges them.*) Good night, Kay. Thank you for a very nice party. And now that you're properly grown-up, I hope you'll be happy.

KAY (*with a slight smile*): Thank you, Gerald. Do you think I will?

GERALD (*his smile suddenly vanishing*): I don't know, Kay. I really don't know.

*Smiles again and shakes hands. Nods and smiles at HAZEL, who enters with tray of tea things.*

MRS. C.: No. I'll see you out, Gerald.

*They go out. HAZEL and KAY can rearrange things a little while talking.*

HAZEL (*thoughtfully*): I've always thought it must be much more fun being a girl than being a man.

KAY: I'm never sure. Sometimes men seem quite hopelessly dull, like creatures made out of wood. And then at other times they seem to have all the fun.

HAZEL (*very seriously for her*): Kay, just now—this very minute—I wish I wasn't a girl. I'd like to be a man—one of those men with red faces and loud voices who just don't care what anybody says about them.

KAY (*laughingly*): Perhaps they do, though.

HAZEL: I'd like to be one of those who don't.

KAY: Why all this?

*HAZEL shakes her head. CAROL and ALAN enter with the rest of the tea things.*

CAROL: Alan says he wants to go to bed.

KAY: Oh—no, Alan. Don't spoil it.

ALAN: How could I?

KAY: By going to bed. It's my birthday, and you're not to leave us until I say you can.

CAROL (*severely*): Quite right, Kay. (*Going up to ALAN.*) And that's because we're very very fond of you, Alan, though you are such a chump. You must smoke your pipe too—for cosiness. (*Generally.*) Robin and Joan are courting in the dining-room now. I can see they're going to be an awful nuisance.

KAY (*as HAZEL and CAROL settle down*): If you had to fall in love with somebody, would you like it to be at home or somewhere else?

HAZEL: Somewhere else. Too ordinary at home. On a yacht or the terrace at Monte Carlo or a Pacific Island. Marvellous!

CAROL: That would be using up too many things at once. Greedy stuff!

HAZEL (*coolly*): I am greedy.

CAROL: I should think so. (*To the other two.*) Yesterday morning, she was in the bath, reading *Greenmantle*, and eating nut-milk chocolate.

KAY (*who has been thinking*): No, it wouldn't be too ordinary,

falling in love at home here. It would be best, I think. Suppose you were suddenly unhappy. It would be awful to be desperately unhappy and in love miles away in a strange house. . . . (*Suddenly stops, shivers.*)

CAROL: Kay, what's the matter?

KAY: Nothing.

CAROL: Then it must have been a goose walking over your grave.

*KAY abruptly turns away from them, going towards the window.*

*HAZEL looks at her—as the other two do—then raises her eyebrows at CAROL, who shakes her head sternly. MRS. C. enters and looks cheerful at the sight of the tea.*

MRS. C. (*cheerfully*): Now then, let's have some tea and be nice and cosy together. Where's Robin?

HAZEL: Spooning with Joan in the dining-room.

MRS. C.: Oh!—hasn't Joan gone yet? I really think she might leave us to ourselves now. After all, it's the first time we've all been together in this house for—how long? It must be at least three years. I'll pour out. Come on, Kay. What's the matter?

CAROL (*in tremendous whisper, seriously*): Sh! It's a Mood.

*But KAY returns, looking rather strained. Her mother looks at her carefully, smiling. KAY manages an answering smile.*

MRS. C.: That's better, darling. What a funny child you are, aren't you?

KAY: Not really, Mother. Where's Madge?

ALAN: She went upstairs.

MRS. C.: Go up, dear, and tell her we're all in here, with some tea, and ask her—very nicely, dear, specially from me—to come down.

HAZEL (*muttering, rather*): I'll bet she's doesn't.

*ALAN goes. MRS. C. begins pouring out tea.*

MRS. C.: This is just like old times, isn't it? And we seem to have waited so long. I ought to tell fortunes again—to-night.

HAZEL (*eagerly*): Oh—yes—Mother, do.

KAY (*rather sharply*): No.

MRS. C.: Kay! Really! Have you had too much excitement to-day?

KAY: No, I don't think so. Sorry, Mother. Somehow, I hated the idea of you messing about with those cards to-night. I never did like it much.

CAROL (*solemnly*): I believe only the Bad Things come true.

MRS. C.: Certainly not. I clearly saw Madge's Girton scholarship, you remember. I said she was going to get one, didn't I? And I

always said Robin and Alan would come back. I saw it every time in the cards.

*Enter JOAN and ROBIN.*

JOAN: I—I think I ought to go now, Mrs. Conway. (*To KAY, impulsively.*) Thank you so much, Kay, it's been the loveliest party there ever was. (*Suddenly kisses her with great affection, then she looks solemnly at MRS. C. who is considering the situation.*) I really have had a marvellous time, Mrs. Conway.

*Standing close to her now. MRS. C. looks quite searchingly at her. JOAN meets her look quite bravely, though a little shaky.*

ROBIN: Well, Mother?

*MRS. C. looks at him, then at JOAN, and suddenly smiles. JOAN smiles back.*

MRS. C.: Are you two children serious?

ROBIN (*boisterously*): Of course we are.

MRS. C.: Joan?

JOAN (*very solemnly, nervously*): Yes.

MRS. C. (*with an air of capitulation*): I think you'd better have a cup of tea, hadn't you?

*JOAN flings her arms round MRS. C. and kisses her excitedly.*

JOAN: I'm so happy.

CAROL (*loudly, cheerfully*): Tea. Tea. Tea.

*Passing of cups, etc. ALAN enters.*

ALAN: Madge says she's too tired, Mother.

*Goes and sits down near KAY.*

MRS. C.: Well, I think we can get on very nicely without Madge. Kay ought to read us some of the new novel she's writing——

*Exclamations of agreement and approval from JOAN and ROBIN and a groan from HAZEL.*

KAY (*in horror*): I couldn't possibly, Mother.

MRS. C.: I can't see why not. You always expect me to be ready to sing for you.

KAY: That's different.

MRS. C. (*mostly to ROBIN and JOAN*): Kay's always so solemn and secretive about her writing—as if she were ashamed of it.

KAY (*bravely*): I am—in a way. I know it's not good enough yet. Most of it's stupid, stupid, *stupid*.

CAROL (*indignantly*): It isn't, Kay.

KAY: Yes, it is, angel. But it won't always be. It *must* come right if I only keep on trying. And then—you'll see.

JOAN: Is that what you want to do, Kay? Just to write novels and things?

KAY: Yes. But there's nothing in simply writing. The point is to be *good*—to be sensitive and sincere. Hardly anybody's both, especially women who write. But I'm going to try and be. And whatever happens, I'm never *never* going to write except what I want to write, what I feel is true to me, deep down. I won't write just to please silly people or just to make money. I'll——

*But she suddenly breaks off, The rest wait and stare.*

ALAN (*encouragingly*): Go on, Kay.

KAY (*confusedly, dejectedly*): No—Alan—I'd finished really—or if I was going to say something else, I've forgotten what it was—nothing much——

MRS. C. (*not too concernedly*): You're sure you're not over-tired, Kay?

KAY (*hastily*): No, Mother. Really.

MRS. C.: I wonder what will have happened to you, Hazel, when Kay's a famous novelist? Perhaps one of your majors and captains will come back for you soon.

HAZEL (*calmly*): They needn't. In fact, I'd rather none of them did.

ROBIN (*teasingly*): Thinks she can do much better than them.

HAZEL (*calmly*): I know I can. I shall marry a tall, rather good-looking man about five or six years older than I am, and he'll have plenty of money and be very fond of travel, and we'll go all over the world together but have a house in London.

MRS. C.: And what about poor Newlingham?

HAZEL: Mother, I couldn't possibly spend the rest of my life here. I'd die. But you shall come and stay with us in London, and we'll give parties so that people can come and stare at my sister, Kay Conway, the famous novelist.

ROBIN (*boisterously*): And what about your brother, Robin, the famous—oh! famous something-or-other, you bet your life.

JOAN (*rather teasingly*): You don't know what you're going to do yet, Robin.

ROBIN (*grandly*): Well, give me a chance. I've only been out of the Air Force about twelve hours. But—by jingo—I'm going to do *something*. And none of this starting-at-the-bottom-of-the-ladder, pushing-a-pen-in-a-corner business either. This is a time when young men get a chance, and I'm going to take it. You watch.

MRS. C. (*with mock alarm, though with underlying seriousness*): Don't tell me you're going to run away from Newlingham, too!

ROBIN (*grandly*): Oh—well—I don't know about that yet, Mother. I might make a start here—there's some money in the place, thanks to some jolly rotten profiteering, and we're pretty well known here, so that would help—but I don't guarantee to take root in Newlingham, no fear! Don't be surprised, Hazel, if I'm in London before you. Or even before you, Kay. *And making plenty of money.* (*To HAZEL.*) Perhaps more than this tall, good-looking chap of yours will be making.

CAROL (*sharply, pointing*): Hazel will always have plenty of money.

MRS. C. (*amused*): How do you know, Carol?

CAROL: I just do. It came over me suddenly then.

MRS. C. (*still amused*): Well now! I thought I was the prophetic one of the family. I suppose it wouldn't be fair if I sent my rival to bed.

CAROL: I should jolly well think it wouldn't. And I'll tell you another thing. (*Points suddenly at ALAN.*) Alan's the happy one.

ROBIN: Good old Alan!

ALAN: I—rather think—you're wrong there, y'know, Carol.

CAROL: I'm not. I *know*.

MRS. C.: Now I'm not going to have this. I'm the one who *knows* in this family. Now wait a minute. (*Closes her eyes, then half playfully, half seriously.*) Yes. I see Robin dashing about, making lots of money and becoming very important and helping some of you others. And a very devoted young wife by his side. And Hazel, of course, being very grand. And her husband *is* tall and *quite* good-looking, nearly as good-looking as she thinks he is. I believe he comes into a title.

ROBIN: Snob!

MRS. C.: I don't see Madge marrying, but then she'll be headmistress of a big school quite soon, and then she'll become one of these women who are on all sorts of committees and have to go up to London to give evidence, and so becomes happy and grand that way.

ROBIN: I'll bet she will, too, good old Madge!

MRS. C. (*gaily*): I'll go and stay with her sometimes—*very* important, the headmistress's mother—and the other mistresses will be invited in to dine and will listen *very* respectfully while I tell them about my other children——

JOAN (*happily, admiringly*): Oh—Mrs. Conway—I can just imagine that. You'll have a *marvellous* time.

MRS. C. (*same vein*): Then there's Carol. Well, of course, Carol will be here with me for years yet——

CAROL (*excitedly*): I don't know about that. I haven't exactly decided *what* to do yet, there are so many things to do.

JOAN: Oh—Carol—I think you could go on the stage.

CAROL (*with growing excitement*): Yes, I could, of course, and I've often thought of it. But I shouldn't want to be on the stage *all* the time—and when I wasn't playing a part, I'd like to be painting pictures—just for myself, y'know—daubing like mad—with lots and lots and lots of the very brightest paint—tubes and tubes of vermilion and royal blue and emerald green and gamboge and cobalt and Chinese white. And then making all kinds of weird dresses for myself. And scarlet cloaks. And black crêpe-de-Chine gowns with orange dragons all over them. And cooking! Yes, doing sausages and gingerbread and pancakes. And sitting on the top of mountains and going down rivers in canoes. And making friends with all sorts of people. And I'd share a flat or a little house with Kay in London, and Alan would come to stay with us and smoke his pipe, and we'd talk about books and laugh at *ridiculous* people, and then go to foreign countries——

ROBIN (*calling through*): Hoy, hoy, steady!

MRS. C. (*affectionately amused*): How are you going to *begin* doing all that, you ridiculous child!

CAROL (*excitedly*): I'd get it all in somehow. The point is—to live. Never mind about money and positions and husbands with titles and rubbish—I'm *going to live*.

MRS. C. (*who has now caught the infection*): All right, darling. But wherever you were, all of you, and whatever you were doing, you'd all come back here sometimes, wouldn't you? I'd come and see you, but you'd all come and see me, too, all together, perhaps with wives and husbands and lovely children of your own, not being rich and famous or anything but just being yourselves, as you are now, enjoying our silly old jokes, sometimes playing the same silly old games, all one big happy family. I can see us all here again——

KAY (*a terrible cry*): Don't!

*She is standing, deeply moved. The others stare in silent consternation.*

MRS. C.: But what is it, Kay?

KAY, *still moved*, shakes her head. *The others exchange puzzled glances, but CAROL hurries across, all tenderness, and puts an arm round her.*

CAROL (*going to her with the solemnity of a child*): I won't bother with any of those things, Kay, really I won't. I'll come and look after

you wherever you go. I won't leave you ever if you don't want me to. I'll look after you, darling.

KAY stops crying. She looks—half-smiling—at CAROL in a puzzled, wistful fashion. CAROL goes back to her mother's side.

MRS. C. (*reproachful but affectionate*): Really, Kay! What's the matter?

KAY shakes her head, then looks very earnestly at ALAN.

KAY (*struggling with some thought*): Alan . . . please tell me. . . . I can't bear it . . . and there's something . . . something . . . you could tell me. . . .

ALAN (*troubled, bewildered*): I'm sorry, Kay. I don't understand. What is it?

KAY: Something you know—that would make it different—not so hard to bear. Don't you know yet?

ALAN (*stammering*): No—I don't—understand.

KAY: Oh—hurry, hurry, Alan—and then—tell me—and comfort me. Something—of Blake's—came into it—— (*Looks hard at him, then struggling, remembers, saying brokenly*):

Joy . . . and woe . . . are woven fine,  
A clothing for the . . . soul divine. . . .

I used to know that verse, too. What was it at the end? (*Remembers, as before*):

And, when this . . . we rightly know,  
Safely through the world we go.

Safely . . . through the world we go. . . .

*Looks like breaking down again, but recovers herself.*

MRS. C. (*almost a whisper*): Over-excitement. I might have known. (*To KAY, firmly, cheerfully.*) Kay, darling, all this birthday excitement's been too much. You'd better go to bed now, dear, and Carol shall bring you some hot milk. Perhaps an aspirin, too, eh? (*KAY, recovering from her grief, shakes her head.*) You're all right now, aren't you, darling?

KAY (*in muffled voice*): Yes, Mother, I'm all right.

*But she turns and goes to the window, pulling back the curtains and looking out.*

MRS. C.: I know what might help, it did once before. Robin, come with me.

JOAN (*rather helplessly*): I ought to go, oughtn't I?

MRS. C.: No, stay a few minutes, Joan. Robin.

*She and ROBIN go out.*

CAROL (*whispering as she moves*): She's going to sing, and I know what it will be.

CAROL *switches out the lights and returns to sit with HAZEL and JOAN, the three girls making a group, dimly but warmly lit by the light coming in from the hall. Very softly there comes the opening bars of Brahms' "Wiegenlied". ALAN joins KAY at the window, so that his face, too, like hers, is illuminated by the moonlight.*

ALAN (*quietly through the music*): Kay.

KAY (*quietly*): Yes, Alan?

ALAN: There will be—something—I can tell you—one day. I'll try—I promise.

*The moonlight at the window shows us ALAN looking at her earnestly, and we just catch her answering smile, as the song swells out a little. And then the lights begin to fade, and very soon the three girls are no more than ghosts and all the room is dark, but the moonlight—and the faces of KAY and ALAN—still lingers; until at last there is only the faintest glimmer, and the Conways have gone, the curtain is down, and the play over.*

END OF PLAY



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